Amrita Pritam

49 days

(a novel)

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49 DAYS

(A Novel)

49 Days is Amrita Pritam's latest novel. Like her other works, it is primarily a novel of romantic love, a man and woman irresistibly drawn to each other. But, unlike others, the texture of this novel is tougher, and its design much more complex. If, on the one hand, its romance is raised to the rarefied atmosphere of the supernatural, on the other, its realism is stark and overpowering. And yet, the two usually opposed aspects have got indistinguishably fused into each other. The mystical and the supernatural may be looked upon as the product of an abnormal state of mind caused by a death-like shock, and the romantic love as manifestation of man's as well as woman's realistic craving for self-realisation. Indeed, the novel has several levels of appeal, and, at each level, it is excitingly absorbing. Taken together, it is at once a novel of communal harmony, social criticism, ironical exposure, and powerful assertion of pure love.

Amrita Pritam is winner of numerous national and international literary awards, including Sahitya Akademi, and Nikola Vaptasarov International Awards.

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Sanjay's entire life had shrunk into one line: the line on his forehead of a faint consciousness.

His lips too had compressed into a similar line that slightly quivered when he feebly asked, "Who are you? Why are you piling these rocks of salt all over me?"

Karim Kadir, his one and only friend by his bedside, was prompt in allaying the curiosity roused. "Not salt, pal. It's blocks of ice.... No one else is around. The doctor's visit is over—And that leaves just me. ME,—your friend Karim, here."

The line on Sanjay's forehead creased in a flicker of recognition. "Who? Karim Mian—of all? Well now Karim Mian, will you listen? My soul's had its day with the body. What's the big idea trying to preserve it with salt-packs?"

As from the melting ice, so drops began trickling from Karim's eyes. He forced words of consolation out of himself. "Nothing's happened Sanjay! The temperature had risen a bit on the high side. But it's subsiding."

Sanjay made a desperate effort to coordinate the conscious part of his self with the look of recognition dawning in his eyes, but failed miserably. All he seemed to be vaguely in the know of was to whom he was speaking. "Friend... Karim.... As with the ancient Egyptians for centuries, you would not be having to mummify me. Remember—the body's made of four elements: fire, water, earth and air. To the same elements must it be consigned. See that that is done. Will you?"

Such were the vibrations set into motion by his weighty voice that Karim began to have an uncanny sense of what a dying body undergoes.

Sanjay was still filling his ears with more supraliminal words: "And friend, whether we consign it to fire, to earth, to water or to vultures and carrion-crows circling in the air above—it all comes ultimately to the same thing. Each religion has selected its own way out. Come to think of it, what's the difference really?"

All tensed up though he was, in as restrained a manner, Karim for his part spun a bit out on the *dolce-vita*-thread they both were yet blessed with. Then changing tactics, gently but firmly, he feelingly dwelt on the human-bondage planchette. "Spare me further suffering. After a good forty-eight hours' vigil, I have the pleasure of hearing your voice, my friend. Let it be as balm to my ears. Have mercy on my soul."

Perhaps most of what Sanjay was fumbling to say fell on the floor. What Karim heard was only, 'forty-eight hours'... as if his eardrums were being used as a sounding-board of a sort. 'Forty- eight... f-o-r-t-y-eight... f-o-r-t...' kept quivering on Sanjay's lips before he was able to have his grip on the reckoning: "Two days. Only two days? That means there's yet another day and a half to go." And then his words faded out. Only his lips kept moving a spell longer in the bid to say more.

Karim shook Sanjay's arm. It fell limp and lifeless. He bent and whispered in his ears: "A day and a half, you said.... Whatever is the day and a half for?"

"You... won't... und... stand..." A good deal of strain went into what was whispered back in meaningless response.

Karim's heart sank. "I understand fully well, friend,—that you got all hooked-up over Meeta's death. I could see it from the way you collapsed, from the seesaw state that followed from the steady decline in your health—. But what's this day-and-a-half note you're playing on? It makes no sense to me."

Sanjay's body was as cold and hard as the blocks of ice. Yet some vital part of him had certainly stuck in somewhere that trickled out into words like droplets from the melting ice. "It... takes... a good... three... days... and... a half for... life... to leave... the body. Two days... gone. A-day-and-a-half more left."

"Meeta's death was a stunning blow, God knows. Why must you go on now adding to it by losing your grip on life?" Karim could not help wailing in as subdued a manner as possible.

He mustered control over himself again to cajole him. "Come now—enough of that! Open your mouth—just for this dose of medicine."

Whether the direction meant anything to Sanjay was difficult to say—but when Karim tipped the contents of the

bottle into the spoon, he refused point-blank. "No, I will not have it. I will not. Not at all." He clinched the need to say anything more by clenching his teeth tightly.

Karim parted his dying friend's lips and forcibly tried to administer the dose. But the medicine trickled out down his chin and neck.

"Have mercy, O Lord!" was all that Karim was able to bring himself to mutter again and again as he shook first one limb, then another, of the body lying prostrate before him. Still he persisted in bringing it round: "The doctor's recommended fresh orange juice and... and vegetable soup. Sip by sip you should be taking one or the other. Tell me how can I cook anything here?... For God' sake. Why don't you let me take you to my place?"

In throat-constricting silence Karim observed that from the fast-disappearing line of consciousness on Sanjay's forehead, it was clear that his voice could not have penetrated. Not really knowing what to do, he helplessly went and stood looking vaguely out of the open window until he caught the attention of the caretaker on duty. Waving out to him to come up, he walked across to the landing, and to save on each precious moment, directed him to run fast for a taxi. Swinging himself around then as the hour of emergency required, he flung open the cupboard to grab a change of clothes. Rolling these and the bottles of medicines in sheets of the newspaper on the table, he packed the larger blocks of ice under the same pressure of urgency into towels, tablecloths, sheets—whatever he could lay his hands on. The frantic search for the key to the room was mercifully over when the taxi was brought. Between him and the caretaker, they were just about to carry their precious charge, when life veered round once again for the standing question: "So a day and a half's over,.... is it?" With more deliberate calculations, "Are three-and-a-half days over?"

Karim's hands began to shake more and more violently as more and more kept on being piled upon him. "But I'm not a Tibetan, am I? Then why has this lama come to fetch me? Why is he putting this leash around my neck? Is it to lead me on to my journey?..." Resignedly, the patient's attitude suddenly changed. "Okay then, I'll follow. Lead me on."

"Have mercy, O Lord!" Karim bit his lips hard on that repeated ejaculation. It needed all his strength now to carry Sanjay downstairs as the caretaker lent a hand with the packages and with the locking up of the room.

Karim's house stood dead centre of the humble settlement—Chirag Delhi. Fairly roomy though it was, yet it was as much a part of the ruins around as the thatched mud-huts flanking it on both sides and the dilapidated well across. And, despite the rather spacious area serving as the village common, a good many hurdles had to be crossed in getting to it. The narrow street that led to it, for one, was made narrower by the string-cots and wicker-stools all over, and for another, cows and calves stood, sat, or lay at all angles—tethered to the pegs along the walls. The bother of approach became more bothersome by the abominable stench that choked an infiltrator's breath. Were one to once pinch nostrils together, take the plunge, and wade through it all, a spring-like freshness in the air was there to greet the venturesome. The dense shade of the neem-trees from the back-lane falling in the inner-courtyard, gave the place a distinction all its own.

Karim had a tough time persuading the taxi-driver to negotiate the slushy and rutted passage up to the corner beyond which in any case further effort was futile. Then getting down, he asked Hussaina, the midwife, to stop patting her dung-cakes until she and his daughter between them transported the packages to his house as he slumped Sanjay carefully over his shoulder and scared the women of the house out of their lives by this strange unannounced entry. "Have mercy on our souls, O Lord!" They both clung to each other for support.

"The Lord by His Grace will have mercy on both your souls, my good wives, if you nurse this man back to health." Laying Sanjay on the cot they realised it had to be set down from its upright position against the wall, Karim added by way of introduction: "He is like both friend and son to me. Nurse him back to health," he pleaded, "and I'll be indebted to you for the rest of my life."

Just as he settled down to apply ice-packs to Sanjay's burning forehead after shunting off one of the two women to set the blackgram soup on the boil, he remembered the oranges he should have bought on the way.

Not pardoning himself for such a grave omission on his own part, he sped his daughter on the errand. "Run along, Shirin, you might be lucky to catch the taxi. The driver was waiting for the engine to cool before he put more water into the radiator."

Like lightning, Shirin rushed out in a flash, and returned. Victoriously she held up four oranges—two in each hand. "The taxi had gone," she explained, "I brought these from Uncle Nazir's house."

How stupid of Karim to have forgotten that his own brother was an orange-seller! "Uncle wasn't at home. He'd gone down town with his push-cart. I brought these from Aunt Zeenat."

"I didn't know I had such a clever and resourceful daughter." A glint came in Karim's eyes. "Now do me another favour, I've run out of ice. More we can't get at any price at this time of the day. There'll be boiling water if we turn the tap on. Go and draw a bucket from the well. We'll have to make do with cool water packs. You will help, won't you?"

* * *

It was well past midnight when the fever showed signs of abating. Sanjay had neither opened his eyes, nor said a word. But such impassivity was evidently not so much from fever as from acute weakness. Karim therefore still had his qualm of fear. Every few seconds he took a hand to the sick man's mouth and nostrils to check on his breathing. Ever so soft it was, but—the Lord be praised—not at all irregular. At regular intervals, he had swallowed the spoons of medicine, juice, and soup—turn by turn. And that was reassuring.

In fact, Karim was not half as worried now as he was earlier in the day. Exhausted, however, from the mental tension and the physical fatigue of assiduous bedside care and comfort of the patient, he stretched himself to get the stiffness out of his arms, legs, and back. "Go and lie down. I'll keep watch." One of his wives sitting by coaxed him. "Rest a little. You look washed out. I will not budge from here."

"Okay, Barkatay," he smiled, "so you do go soft over me still, do you?"

"After seeing you melting over someone today.... Otherwise I'd have come back long ago to the conclusion that like a stone left unpicked in the lentils, you could not soften down. I didn't know you had a heart inside somewhere."

Karim sportingly bore the brunt of such umbrage he was unused to. "Honest to God, let me tell you, Barkatay—should something happen to this precious attachment I have, I'll not long survive him!..."

Karim had barely had a cat's nap, when his wife shook him violently out of heartfelt concern. "Wake up and see him for yourself! He'd opened his eyes... and he'd looked round. He mumbled something too—but may the Holy Lord above my soul,—I could make neither head nor tail of what all he said."

Karim leapt leopard-like across and bent as over a cub. "Open your eyes, Sanjay! Look where you are. See where I've brought you...."

Sanjay's eyes opened wide on the wooden-stool on which a glass of water, half a cup of soup, and an orange had been kept. The option of choosing what he needed first was left open to him.

"Wouldn't you like something?" Wasting not a split second Karim extended his hand flamboyantly toward the stool.

"Do you folks make daily offerings like this?"

Karim could not easily laugh aside that question. "It's only the first day..."—when he felt that the glazed-eye-gaze had gotten steady in focus on him.

"These are but rituals... Meaningless."

"What rituals?" Karim was on his feet, alert on guard.

"From the belief that food must be kept on the spot one has died. For forty-nine days. They say the spirit keeps returning to be fed. For forty-nine days. But a spirit has no hands to feed its mouth, nor mouth for hands to feed. Hands or mouth."

Terrified by such a type of delirium, Karim hurriedly took a hand in his and shook the body. "Nothing's happened to you, Sanjay. Here—look, this is your hand, isn't it? And these are your shoulders. These your legs. Your body's in fine form!"

"No. You're wrong. This is NOT MY BODY!" Sanjay's voice rose in emphasising his statement as it were—with each word distinctly pronounced. He paused for breath, then resumed. "This is a mummy-case you've made of me. You've cremated my real body, haven't you?"

"No, Sanjay, No! YOU'RE WRONG there!" Karim whined.

"I saw you.... I stood witness to your act."

"When? Say when?"

Sanjay fumbled at that point as if prodding hard into his memory-cells. Not finding anything to hold on to, he looked lost.

"Go on... tell me when?" Karim's went on riveting the same question into him—though yet with the earlier grave note of concern.

"When Meeta's pyre was set on fire...."

Karim got some satisfaction in learning now the level at which Sanjay's conscious self had rather badly got stuck. He tenderly patted his forehead. "You can't die with the dead, my dear friend! Meeta actually did die. You didn't. You're alive! Be sensible now. Talk sense . You're very much alive. You're with me: your friend Karim."

"No, I'm with Meeta. I... I just now saw myself with her."

The best course, Karim thought, was to let him ramble on. He would probably get Meeta out of his system and finally rally round to normalcy.

"So you met her, did you?" He dug deeper. "And where did you meet her? Aren't you going to tell me that?"

"From a great distance. In bluish twilight."

"Oh, I see! And how and why was the light 'bluish'?"

Karim carried on the conversation as coolly and calmly as he could.

"That I can't say. I can see it even now. All round. Pale blue it is."

"But what light is it?"

"That I can't say. It's not of the sun... nor of the moon... nor of the body."

"Can you say where exactly you're sitting right now?"

"Not sitting. I'm floating around."

"Is she like water... blue?"

"No. Like air."

"But birds with feathers fly in the air."

"So do souls."

"And is Meeta's among them?"

"I got a glimpse... from a great distance. I'll spot her out again."

"What kind of clothes is she wearing?"
"Souls don't wear clothes."
"Then how can you spot her?"
"Like to like. That's all. Simple."
"But how can like float to like?"
"They have bodies... of fire and air."
"And what does YOUR body comprise, if I may ask?"
"Also of fire and air. That's why she's bound to spot me out."
"What else can you see?"
"Nothing. All's blue. Pale blue. Bluish light."
And Karim's heart sank. He covered his face with both his hands to control himself from sobbing aloud.

* * *

Early next morning, he hurried out to fetch a doctor. On the way home, he described the sick man's condition. "It was only fever he'd got.... The temperature rose pretty high.... We applied ice-pack... gave him the medicine prescribed.... He's not too hot now... but what worries us is that he's not pulling out of his delirium.... What do we do about that, Doctor Sahib?"
But when they had negotiated the lane and come to the doorway, Karim took a step forward and stopped the hezler he had implicit faith in from entering with a gesture of his hand.
The latter naturally stood against the wall until the dilemma was resolved and he was called in. "Would you like to brief me on something you'd forgotten?"
"Precisely."
"I must know all. Only then can I give the correct treatment."
"Sure... sure. That is as should be. Only."
And then, Karim lowered his voice almost to a whisper "The boy's otherwise quite fine. Only..." He stuttered, "I thought I ought to confide in you that he's taken a death to heart... a woman."
"Who? His wife, was it?"
"No. He's yet a bachelor."
"Was he then to have been married to her?"
"How could he have? She was already married."

"Then?" He looked puzzledly at Karim, who—for his part, was perplexedly turning over in his mind how and why a doctor could be bothered over a prospective patient's heart affair.

"What did she die of? Was there a case of... ?" the doctor broke through Karim's rather long-drawn-out silence.

"Nothing... er... of that sort." Karim was flabbergasted at the question."She was sure to die. It was a chronic disease she'd been suffering from. But she should have lived." And then as if in self-flagellation, he gave vent to his own state.

"He's turning me mad too... with his suffering. He loved her. She could not be saved. He's taken her death to heart. That's the case in nutshell, Doctor Sahib!"

"Don't you worry any more. We'll cure him, I'm sure..." Determined to treat the patient, he entered through the main door and then allowed himself to be led on.

The pulse-count was taken, the blood-pressure checked, the lungs examined and tapped on. Sanjay lay lifelessly still all through. "Did he complain of any pain?"

Upon the doctor's repeating the question, Sanjay's expresion changed from complete passivity to irritability of a kind, as if his peace was being disturbed. His face muscles tautened. And then he responded. "Pain? Where? I've no pain. No pain at all."

"In your head? Arms? Legs?"

"My head, arms and legs are not made of flesh and blood. So there's no question of pain."

The doctor was naturally astounded to hear this. He goggled and gasped at him and at Karim.

"This is precisely what is wrong, Doctor Sahib. He's under the hallucination that he's not alive."

The doctor held his hand up in front of Sanjay's eyes. "What's this now? Can you tell?"

"Bluish light... purplish... greyish... like clouds."

The doctor looked around. Then, seeing Karim's daughter standing in the doorway, he drew her nearer, and taking off the scarlet veil she was wearing, spread it out on both hands and asked, "What colour is this?"

"Blue...bright blue...shimmeringly blue."

The doctor gave an injection, wrote out a prescription, and informed Karim. "It's a job daily—I'm afraid, for the next few days. I'll come myself tomorrow morning. This medicine is to be four times a day. Should his condition deteriorate any time in the evening or night, you must inform me—however you do. There's no worry—right now. The temperature's touching normal."

Karim accompanied the doctor when the visit was over. The medicine had to be brought. En route, he politely but positively demaned the exact position. "Tell me the truth, Doctor Sahib is there really any danger?"

Thinking deeply, the doctor shook his head. "Frankly no... You were wisely right in telling me about the shock. It's knocked him... out. No doubt about that. But I shouldn't get rattled. Did you note one thing?"

"That is?"

"When I held up my hand only, he said it was 'bluish... purplish... greyish... like clouds?' "

"Oh that! He'd been saying that since last night."

"I'm drawing your attention to something else.... When I held up the crimson veil, remember, he said it was "blue... bright blue... shimmeringly blue.' "

"Quite so."

"To me there's much more to it than appears to you on the surface."

"You mean to say that he's still conscious?"

"It's going to be tough pulling him out... true... but deep down he certainly is."

Karim was over so far as to chime in eagerly "...and he answers... whenever he does... taking all the time on earth, but answer he does. And his vocabulary's perfect. That means he must be hearing what we're saying in his presence."

"That's it! Now you get what I mean?"

"Last night when he spoke of the blue light, he related it quite clearly to Meeta."

"The same woman? His lady love? The shock of her death it was. Was it?"

"The same."

"Probably," the doctor thought hard, "he's probably projected the death-wish on himself."

"I don't get you, I'm afarid."

"He probably's under the illusion that he... not she... is dead."

"How can that be? He's clearly aware of her death."

"How can you say that?"

"He now thinks that her soul's in Heaven. He seems to have gone beyond the blue skies and seen it there. If he's seen it, how can he not be aware of the death-factor?"

The doctor nodded his head in agreement. After a ponderous pause, he none the less made it clear that he was going to take no chances. "We'll observe another two days. Should there be no change, we'll have to get him admitted in the hospital."

* * *

Sanjay lay just as he had been left. Karim returned and felt him all over. The fever had surely not gone up. As per instructions, he fed him—spoonful after spoonful until half a cup of milk had been taken, and then administered the medicine.

As he sat by his bedside, he remembered the doctor's observations. Somewhere deep down a little consciousness was there. So he sent Shirin to Atay Mali's place in the next lane for a few flowers. He knew his wife made the amulets and garlands that their son sold every evening at India Gate.

Until communication with the outside world was reestablished, Karim made no effort to draw Sanjay into any conversation on the 'blue' theme. It was only when he noticed the lips move to murmur—ever so slightly—that he impishly asked: "Tell me now, are you there all by yourself, or are there others too with you?"

"There are... many souls." Sanjay's soft and low voice leapt eagerly to grapple with the subject even as it seemed to have link-ups with regions remote.

Karim consequently got as near as near could be to him and put his lips almost to his ears: "Can you guess whose souls they are?"

"No!..."

"Can you see Karim by any chance?"

"Who?"

"Karim, Don't you remember your friend, Karim Qadir?"

"Na. He must be somewhere down on earth."

"Aren't you tired? Bored? Lonely?"

"No. Souls don't get tired. They haven't the weight of their bodies to carry..."

Karim held the garland Shirin had returned with under Sanjay's nose. He sniffed! Assured of his having inhaled a few whiffs of the sweet scent, he parried further. "Come now. Haven't you yet found Meeta out?"

For a good while, there was no response. In a voice that denoted delayed reaction, there was then a tremor of excitement. "Yes... of course... there she is far off! So many others are blocking my view. She surely is there. I can now smell the flowers she's wearing in her hair today."

Karim sighed deeply. He had sent in his application for leave. There was no strain of office-routine. With the worry wearing him down, he spread a mat on the floor to rest his aching back and to overcome the numbness creeping all though his body.

With 'Karim Mian! Karim Mian!' hammering at his ear-drums, Karim was rudely woken out of his forty winks. As he struggled to stand up, his foot got interlocked with a leg of the cot and shot an excruciating spasm of pain all through his body. Gripping tightly and releasing the ankle with one hand, he firmly held the head of the bed with the other to regain his equilibrium. "Here I am, right here by your side." But he felt that his words of assurance did not get registered. Sanjay's lips were moving as if in conversation with someone. Who it could be was hard for Karim to figure out. Straining his audio-visual nerves to the utmost,he heard a scarcely audible whisper: "My friend, hadn't the Messenger of Death asked you to look in this glass so you could get a true picture of your previous life? Like a meteor didn't Karim whizz by? For a moment I clean forgot he belonged to a past world. I hailed him loudly!"

Karim realised that Sanjay had not yet gotten out of the habit of confronting himself with 'my friend'... whenever he happened to be disturbed or in a dilemma. Assuming the role of Sanjay's counterpart, he therefore glided in pat: "See how unique are the properties of this mirror! You can hark back to whatever phase you want to of your past."

"Really! Let me look in once again then!" The earlier voice had now filled out with the fresh sap of joy. "You're right! I see Karim, my best friend, once again..."

"If he's your 'best friend', wouldn't you want him to come to you... to be by your side?"

"Oh no, no! I wouldn't be that selfish! What would happen to his two wives? Who would raise his children for him?"

"But the least you can do is to have a word with him. He is after all, here... right here."

"Yes, but only in the glass. Hadn't you yourself just said you could only see him. You didn't say you could talk to him. Did you?"

"Okay. Let's cut all that out for a minute. Would you be wanting to see anyone else from down below?"

"Meeta, I should have liked to. But she's no longer there."

"Let's turn away from friends. How about some snaps and snippets from the past?"

"Why should I be wanting to go through the agony of seeing her suffer... married to another. Bah! All earthly obligations."

"But wouldn't you like to meet Meeta?"

"That's why I've travelled all the way here."

"Do I take it that you're interested in no one else?"

"No."

"Shall I take the glass away then?"

"Wait a mo! Let me have one last look at Karim."

Karim shifted his hand from Sanjay's forehead and felt his body all over. Pressing his cheek to his, he shrieked from gnawing grief, "Come to your senses, Sanjay! Pull yourself through! Pull yourself together!"

* * *

With a heart eaten out by anxiety, Karim hovered over his charge. Unctuous care he took in giving him a good warm sponge-bath, in changing his clothes and in getting the medicine, juice, and soup by rotation, down his throat. A second round of the set of chores taken on and completed too, he stood crestfallen. There was no indication of Sanjay's coming out of the deep coma he was in.

Both Barkatay and Nehmatay had, to be quite fair, been throwing in all the time, effort, and will they had within their power. Yet there was no response. To keep the hushed atmosphere sustained, they tweaked the ears of their two sons and shooed them out onto the street if they so much as squeaked.

The two teenaged daughters, Shirin and Jamila, were sensibly proving to be genuine assets.

So he recounted the incident of the morning as he broke bread. "Just imagine! Dead as a doornail he looks lying there, yet the first and only person he was able to see reflected in the mirror from above, was me! And when the Messengers of Death asked if he wanted his friend to be called up to keep him company, he put up a real good fight: What would happen to his wives? Who would raise his children? So he stoutly resisted with no thought of his own icebergic isolation. And all this, mark you, when he has never set his eyes on you!" Karim anguishedly led himself on to work out an acceptable equation of relationships between all the members of his family and his friend. "Now do you see what he means to me?... Sinner that I am, I can't pray hard enough. I beseech you to... Your voice might reach the Almighty and his life saved!... I will spare myself for nothing you ask for in return."

Putting an end to his entreaties, Nehmatay, the younger of the wives, swerved round with her characteristic bluntness. "Very well then, Mian! The bargain would be struck.—I'm speaking for us both now.—We'll pray hard for sure, but would you tell us which of us will take Mumtaz's place? Whose face will replace hers after all these years? Barkatay's or mine? Tell us that first and then we'll see to our prayers!"

Had he not been in his nerve-wrecking plight — to which no end was in sight,—he would have clipped off a tongue, so flippantly licking up Mumtaz. But cornered as he was by Fate, he could not have been more pragmatic: "Well now, is that a question to be asked? Would Barkatay not be the 'Elder Mumtaz' and you the 'Younger'?" But, of course, he did not know that Shirin, who had come into the kitchen with the bucket of cool well-water, overheard what was transpiring. Or would he have known about her silent participation—had he not gone to the little, dark box-room for a clean towel and seen

her on the floor—hands held up, eyes closed—in deep meditative prayer?

Afraid of disturbing her, he promptly stole back into the courtyard and probed the starry heavens above. 'So this too was a time I was to reckon with. O Lord! I shall meet her in Thy Kingdom when It will come. Not now on this earth, nor ever before could I have met her here... although I have just seen her through the face of my daugher.' And a long-felt hollow deep inside his heart seemed suddenly to have been filled out. And he thought. And he thought. The lifelong hollow need never have been formed, had the Shia-Sunni distance between the two Muslim sects not cropped up. He might have had a home filled with the life and laughter he had sought.

The two spouses were like thorns that had sprouted in the empty space meant for Mumtaz. A scent permeated the air now however—as if his love for her had only today blossomed out. And his hands bent down to her in deep prayer on the floor in the dark, as if to press her hand.

Although he had hired a fan, Karim thought it better to shift Sanjay's cot out into the open and his own as well by his side, when it got to be comfortably cool.

He dozed off and on for some time until he heard Sanjay's voice: like that of one talking in a dream. He rose and sat on the edge of the other cot to be nearer and hear better. Some words tumbled out well-formed, others seemed to fall back behind his lips and got swallowed: 'What did you say? Blue light... of blue knowledge... and white light? God's Heavens. No, I do not feel scared... its blindingly bright.'

"What's blindingly bright, Sanjay?" Karim deliberately repeated the words uttered.

As once before, in a delayed reaction of a kind, Sanjay muttered: 'They've renounced the world. Heavens! No. I don't want to go there. What's that yellow light now?... Of salvation? No salvation... Meeta... There she is... Meeta... She's swinging in the seven-hued rainbow." And then, as if he was now standing beside her he whispered in her ear, "Me-e-eta!" And then he was quiet for a pretty long time.

Karim went back to his own cot. With renewed anxiety, his temples began throbbing. "The little consciousness he had, has perhaps gone. He's found the one he'd all his life sought. If he'd regained it, he'd have lost her again. That he hasn't...."

Karim raised both his hands in prayer pleadingly-'What is thy will, O Lord?' Then he bent over and began rubbing the soles of Sanjay's feet to restore the sluggish blood circulation to normal.

Between his troubled sleep-laden and wakeful-hours, streaks of dawn began breaking in the day. The leaves and branches of the neem-tree outside strained the brightening light into the steady rain that fell in the corner—swinging as it did with the wind playing upon the foliage of the tree.

'Strange are Thy ways, O Lord!' He breathed out heavily. 'Sanjay's soul is probably at rest.' He sighed. 'What else could the light have symbolised? The soul he could not meet till it inhabited a brown body—he's been able to in God's Heavens...'

It was only when his cheeks were wet that he realised that tears had been streaming down. And when he brushed them off with the back of his hand, another thought flitted across his mind, "No, this rain of light augurs well. He must get well—He must yet be among the living."

He rose and splashed his face with fresh water. Careful not to disturb his sleeping wives and children, he padded his way to the kitchen to fix himself some tea. Like the flames, thoughts on thought, lit up his brain. And like the flames with the column of smoke, his thoughts were threatened to being snuffed out. He bent down to blow up the fire, and with a strong breath succeeded indeed in raising fine steady red glow. His eyes nearly popped out of his head on suddenly seeing Shirin sitting by his side to take over the chore from him.

"Go and rest, Abba! Leave the tea to me. I'll not be long at it."

Making tea was not his line. Any further coaxing to go out and keep watch over his ward was unnecessary.... Just as well. He caught on to the soft and slow word-formulations. 'Gre-e-en-light. Light-gr-e-e-en light... de-ep-and-dark-gre-e-en.'

Instead of feeding him with a spoon, he sat Sanjay up against his own chest; rested his head on a shoulder, took the cup out of his daughter's hand, and put it to his lips. When he had him drink almost all of it, he called out. "Pour out some more, daughter."

And as she filled the cup, more words fell into his ears. 'De-ep-dark-red... light-red... de-ep-dark.'

Although the light of day was not too bright, yet colour from colour could be made out of the earlier shades of grey. All at once, Karim woke up to the fact that Shirin wore the same red veil she had had yesterday over her head. That eased his tension a bit. He was hopeful of Sanjay's regaining consciousness since the red of the veil must have got reflected as red light on his retina, despite the fact that he had yet made no effort to open his eyes. Or perhaps he had. That explained how the other shades had made way for the red.

Life and light had begun filling out the morning by now. And, not that he had to—since the doctor would anyway be coming on his own—yet he stirred out in his direction. He had as little control over his feet as he had over his mind and heart.

Out of courtesy he picked up the bag, but with the supplication: "Doctor Sahib! Spare yourself no pain... I'll not spare myself the cost."

"How is he?" The doctor stopped in the doorway a little uncertainly.

"As he was. No change at all. Except perhaps for his temperature. That's normal."

"Wait a moment." He held Karim back from hailing a taxi passing by but did not himself move—inside or out.

"Did you say your name is Karim Qadir?"

"I did."

"And Sanjay, the patient's?"

"That's right."

"How's that? You're Muslim; he's Hindu."

"Correct."

"What I mean is—should the worst happen—who'll be responsible?"

"The Lord's above us. We're all at His Mercy, aren't we?"

"You have not understood. Who'll sign up for him should we be having him admitted to the hospital?"

"I will. Who else?"

"But you're no relation of his. Your signature will not be accepted."

"Don't you get involved in such convolutions, Doctor Sahib! Let him get well first. There'll be time enough for you to ask such questions and him to answer them."

"I quite see what you mean. But the law is the law."

Karim's heart sank. The line in his forehead dug a deeper furrow of thought. "What type of law is it if it establishes no relationship between friend and friend?"

The cut-and-dried social-practice line that had marked foreheads down the ages, stood out in the doctor's. "I advise you not to lose time in informing his relations. Better still, his parents."

"They died long back."

"What about brothers and sisters?"

"He has only one stepbrother who hasn't met him for as long I can remember."

"Well, now's the time he should stand by his bedside."

"How do you expect me to get in touch with him? I know not so much as his name, let alone his address."

"You should try to. Right away."

"How can I?"

"What's the way out then?"

"Leave it to the Almighty."

"I suggest you give it a second thought. It can well erupt into a Hindu-Muslim riot on religious issue."

"Let it...."

"It can rebound and smoulder on your children's shoulders."

"How would it matter? We'd hardly count ourselves among the living should something happen to him."

The doctor stepped into the taxi that had anyway remained standing. Karim too followed with the bag. On the way, he was reminded of the day when Meeta had, in her serious condition, been turned out of doors by her husband. No one alive had claimed her as theirs in the little hole he had found for her. But when she died, they had glided in and slided up on the lines laid by the law to take possession of her body. And as the taxi sped along the road flanked on both sides by faceless houses, and more houses, he kept looking both left and right—only to come to the conclusion that claims are over not the living but the dead.

As the doctor examined the patient: taking his pulse rate, checking on his heart beat with the stethoscope, and on his temperature with the thermometer—Karim recounted the

colour-story of that morning. "And I also propped him up and made him take his tea from the cup."

The doctor raised his arms, held up his feet, and shook him all over. He called him by his name. The patient responded to no stimulus at all. The body remained as limp and lifeless as before. He gave an injection.

"Strange! Try feeding him a little rice mashed in milk or soup."

"Don't you find any change?" Karim was in anguish.

"Slight...."

"We see none." Karim ran his anxious eyes over the sick man's face.

"You don't observe the difference carefully. Yesterday I could have pricked him with needles all over. To-day his face-muscles tautened with pain when I gave him the jab."

After the doctor's visit, Karim stirred in some sugar and soaked a few small pieces of bread in hot milk. Propping Sanjay up against himself as he had done earlier in the morning, he began the laborious process of making him feed himself... calculating how many times the spoon dropped. He had little control yet over the muscles of his fingers.

Once he almost held the handle. That was a pleasant surprise. But again it slipped.

Another exercise was now called for. Karim gripped his fingers over the handle, dipped it into the cup, and took a little of the mess to his mouth. By such repetition, he was delighted in sensing that, ever so slightly but surely, the patient's fingers were gradually beginning to tighten and control movement.

With a spurt of baby-words, the growing therapist in him cajoled: "Here... here now. This is your hand. This... your mouth. Now take your hand to your mouth. This way.... Good!"

Sanjay had held the spoon without support! And lo and behold—the hand then was slowly moving towards the cup too!

Karim nearly choked with joy. "Sanjay!" He cried. Disbelievingly he heard him respond softly in an almost inaudible whisper: "Yes."

"How are you feeling now?" He did not know what really he must ask and how.

"So... you are giving my body back to me?"

These words were even more astounding. "It was always with you, Sanjay!" A lump rose in the listener's throat.

"No... not always. The Messenger of Death told me."

"He did! Did he?"

"Yes, so long after death you can't get it...."

"And how long may 'so long' be?"

"So long... so long. I don't know how long. As there is a 'life-horoscope', is there is a 'death-horoscope'."

"A death-horoscope? And what can you read off it?"

"Three forms?"

"And what are those?"

"The first of Dharma: comprising fire and ether."

"And then?"

"Sambhog."

"What is that?"

"You get body for body... again... the same to look at... the same to feel."

"And does the body got back get the same soul as well?"

"Sure. I have the same hands and feet."

Karim got comfort from this basic change in his condition. He had begun to accept his body as his own. So he had some water warmed up and brought in, and the door shut. After a thoroughly good spongebath and dry-towelling of the body, he changed his clothes and let him lie undisturbed.

* * *

At dusk, as one was at her washing and the other at picking stones from the rice, both wives sat on the parapet of the well. Whether their voices had risen or the worst was over, Karim was anyway relaxed enough to prick up his ears to Barkatay's at the moment. "If only I could hack this tree right down to it's roots! The whole day I have the wretched broom in hand. Its leaves keep messing up the courtyard."

"Look at it now! I'll never be through with the sweeping."

Karim shook from the shock: as if a plot to hack down his body had been unearthed. After the brief morning-session charge he consigned to himself he had lain quietly, while thoughts had kept falling as fast from his own mind as leaves from the much-maligned neem-tree. And at this hour of dusk,

as bitter was Nehmatay's voice. "Chop it down!" She would, would she? Karim jolted up in a fit of rage.

He might have bolted had Shirin's chance-landing at exactly this moment not averted what might have been a shattering collision. Her expectancy of appreciation completely defused his explosive power with her solicitous: "Look, Abba. Look what I have brought!"

She held a tender little plant, roots and all, in her hands. "From Uncle Atay's... it is.... And see, here're some flowers. And how often do you think can I come hopping along begging for more?" said I. 'And why can't I raise a bush and have some of my own? And so he gave me this. I'm going to plant it right here. In our own courtyard. We'll have heaps of sweet-smelling jasmines of our own." She held up her grubby hands for him to see better.

The highly-charged atomosphere cleared all at once. This was an auspicious sign. He descended to her level of age and stature. "Well now, isn't that wonderful! Let's get down to putting it in the soil. Here, I'll dig the hole and you set it in! The watering will follow. Say now... would this spot do? At the entrance, it'll catch the eye... don't you think?"

"There's fear of it being trampled down here... don't you think?" Shirin surveyed their patch critically.

"What about this side of the well?"

"That's where the washing's hung out to dry. And down there we scrub and scour our utensils."

"Then I suggest this spot. Outside your little room is best. You can tend it."

"No Abba! the sun's sizzling hot here. The rays fall direct. Even I am roasted. This is after all a sensitive little plant. It'll burn up in no time."

The windows to the right-wing rooms faced the east; the ones opposite were therefore comparatively much cooler. Shirin's rather finicky decision having been finally arrived at: on the corner at right angles with the third wall, Karim readily gave in.

A large kitchen-knife and the handle of a ladle were the improvised tools hit on in lieu of a spade. Between father and daughter the hole was finally dug, the plant put in, the loose soil filled back and watered. Then solemnly Karim washed his

hands, touched his eyes ritualistically in a silent prayer straight from the heart: 'May your blessed hands, my daughter, plant the tree of Resurrected Life.' This was doubly meaningful, since the place chosen was outside the room Sanjay was in. But Karim gave not the slightest indication of what was blessed or what was not.

The dense midnight-darkness was pierced through by Sanjay's cry. "No, no. God is not swinging in the seven-hued rainbow.

"It's Meeta."

Karim shot across with lightning speed to switch on the courtyard light. A jagged current seemed to have sawed Sanjay's shivering body... hands, feet and all right through. And a fear stabbed Karim's heart. "Who knows what regions his soul is travelling in and through? His body's in this. Do souls really find their way back to the same bodies?"

He put his mouth to Sanjay's ear to humour him. "You're brimming over with health. It is Meeta on the rainbow-swing. I see her too."

Sanjay boiled over on him, "Then why did you lie? Why did you first say she was not Meeta? Why did you?" He panted for breath.

"Go on!" Karim challenged him. "Why have you stopped? Why don't you tell me what I should or should not have said?"

"That... that deep red's the colour for Heaven and that light one for Hell."

'Okay, I did say that."

"I don't want to go anywhere but...."

"But where?"

"There where the seven-hued rainbow is. But aren't you lying again?"

"I am not."

"That's what I thought. Messengers of Death ought not to lie."

"I did NOT tell ANY lie."

"Then whay did you say she wasn't there?"

Karim got confused. How could he go on in tangled circles?

"Go on, why's your mouth corked now?"

"Well, if you really want to know... I thought—while you're on your voyage, you might like to have an idea of Holy High Heaven as well!"

"I would—provided that you also'd let me have a look around. Hell... there they danced and pranced with their sword-blades dripping blood. But I want to go to her. Go away! I don't want you."

To stop him from erupting again and exhausting himself and from fear he might injure himself in his present rather precarious condition, he swung back to a totally different topic in a totally different tone. "Come now... my friend ... tell me... do you remember what you were in your past life?"

"No, I do not."

By now Karim had a pretty clear idea of the depths of the subconscious into which Sanjay had sunk. No great purpose would be served in forcing him back into normalcy. The 'humouring-him-game' had to go on a little more, he reckoned. "Would you like to? I could show you a glass. You'd see your past in it."

"I've already seen it. I saw my friend Karim in it."

"Then wouldn't you like to know what you were... you did, I mean?"

"Well... okay... show me."

"Here you are."

"Ah yes! Now I recall. I used to write... stories and...."

"Why have you stopped writing?"

"How can I now?"

"Just record all you're seeing in here."

"But how do I get down to the act?"

"I'll get you pen and paper."

"But you only said just now that the hands and feet I have are different from those of folk down below."

Karim was in a fix. The plan he had thought up of canalising Sanjay's mind into work, had fallen through. Or had it? "These writers have a strange curse upon them...." He heard him mumble.

"What's that?"

"Even when they are dead, the itch continues. It's compulsive with them. Even if they have no hands. Listen!"

"Go on."

"Were I to go on dictating what I've seen and am seeing, would you take it down?"

"Certainly." Pat came Karim on that. It entailed taking too much upon himself—with just the broken Urdu he had some grasp of—but in the situation there was no other way.

"Okay then. Lead me to that place where they dance with hands gripping knives that are dripping with blood. It was Hell, wasn't it?"

"So it was. But are you sure you're making no mistake? Would you rather go to Heaven?"

"Later."

"As you please."

"Have you equipped yourself fully with writing material?

"Not yet." Upon which Karim zipped forth and back with what he could grab, having nothing in that line of his own—a few leaves torn from some exercise-book and a pencil from the children's room.

Squatting on the floor by the cot he shot off: "Here we go then! I'm ready...."

"This side. Look this side." Sanjay apparently was having an off-beat experience in his Fantasia Land.

Karim did not know which way to turn his head. He stared into Sanjay's screwed-up face.

"Queer, isn't it? I thought I'd seen a whole crowd of children going to school. That was from far-off. Coming nearer I see only small bags walking. Is that how it is in Hell?"

"I suppose so."

"If the children don't go with the bags, I ask you—how'll they learn to read and write?"

Karim could give no answer to that. As before, he blankly stared on into Sanjay's face.

"What's your name?" he suddenly asked.

"My name?" Karim did not expect that elementary question.

"The Messenger of Death perhaps goes just by that name. He has no other."

"I suppose so...."

"Hey, look! There's a cock-fight on. Let's go nearer to see it properly."

"As you please!"

Suddenly Sanjay burst out into side-splitting laughter. "Look in front of you! All the cocks are perched on chairs!

They're pecking at each other. They're all bruised and bleeding. Can you read the writing on that wall?"

"Won't you read it aloud for me?"

"Can't you?"

"Don't you know I can't?"

"It says that the laws governing friendships sit on these."

"Is that so?"

"O Lord!" Sanjay was visibly shocked. "Is that what laws are enacted for? For bruising and bleeding?" And he sighed deeply. "O Lord! I'd forgotten these were laws for the governance of Hell."

The leaden weight of quietude that had fallen was broken through by Karim's query. "And what else do I write?"

"What.... There's a mass of heads there. On the high platform stands one speechifying. Listen silently."

All Karim could do was to raise his eye to the star-spangled skies and break through the pall of silence with a prayerful sigh: "Have mery, O Lord!"

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Of course you took the Lord's name when you're forbidden to.... That man on the platform is warning: those who do not pay heed to the regulations, will be imprisoned."

"What for? Just...."

"Speaking the truth entails violation of the law during election-times. After leading me to Hell, how can you ask me that question? Shouldn't it be the other way round?"

"I'd asked only in the course of your dictation...."

Musing on that reminder for some time, Sanjay gave expression to his dissatisfaction: "This writing-business by proxy doesn't work out somehow."

"Then get down to it yourself. Here's the paper."

"Are you kidding? Had I been down below, I would have for sure. I'm disbelievingly seeing so much."

"What, for instance?"

"They choose symbols for the Elections, don't they?"

"They do."

"The party that's set up this paraphernalia has a 'chair' of theirs. Let's move on closer and see what those in that marquee have."

"Fine."

"How's this now? This party, too is trading on the 'chair'. The only difference is that that one's white and this one's green. Let's see what the third has."

"This is going to be interesting."

Sanjay had a hearty laugh over the continuing competition. "Gosh! Here's another 'chair!' This one's red! I wish I could descend to earth again and write all about this high drama with my own hand."

Karim touched his forehead with his right hand and raised his eyes to the skies: "O Rahim! Great is the Power and Glory, O Lord! He is again talking of the world."

"Terrifying! Ghastly! Listen. The towncrier's announcing that the winner'll be garlanded with twenty-eight skeletal-heads!"

"What did you say?" Karim was blood-curdingly horrified. "...and also that fresh-blood would be drunk! And... and look straight across. The cries of those masses there tug at your heart-chords! Some men are carving their bodies."

"That sign-post at the centre of the vast grounds says that taxes are collected there."

"Taxes... did you say?"

"And it says that the foolish, that those not working, and those not fit to work—are exempted. On the other hand, taxability to the tune of fifty per cent—mind you—of the flesh and blood of their bodies pertains to those sweating for their bread. In other words, the intellectuals and the intelligentsia are to be taxed the most: up to ninety per cent of their income."

From sheer fatigue and from all he was going through,—Sanjay had by now begun trembling like an aspen-leaf. Karim pressed his legs and arms to give him some relief.

"It's too much... too much." Sanjay struck out with penetrating force. "They are taxing those with minds and protecting the mindless!"

Karim got a few drops of water down his throat to calm him down. But he was still uncontrollable. "Search? What do you want to search for?"

"What do you suspect?" Karim sidled along supportively for comfort.

"They say they're launching a massive 'Search' programme. Not a single house not a single pocket will they spare today."

"What's the idea?"

"They say we've smuggled in Truth. You can smuggle in gold, jewels, opium, liquor—anything contraband—they say, what you can't is—Truth! Not in any form. That's the most dangerous."

"What then can we do?"

"Even if you keep it within you as something precious, they threaten to cut your heart to bits to get to it."

"What do we do then?"

"Let's go to someone powerful... a minister, who'll wrench us out of their clutches."

"What else can we do?"

"But we don't know anyone. Wait, just a moment... we'll approach this man."

Mopping up the cold sweat he had broken into from head to foot,—Karim was on his guard. "We don't know how the wind blows here. Let's first try to pierce through what those men are putting their heads together over."

"Can you make out anything?"

"They're saying that they have a minister here only for the sale of armaments. He goes on extensive tours every month to find markets for, and or to replenish stocks of, bombs and the latest of sophisticated missiles. The most effective ploy he uses in his salesmanship is: People must be kept fighting to kill: to combat the menace of population-explosion."

"Really!"

"And they're saying that they have a Minister of Dissensions. His function is to see that rounds of fire between Warring-Faiths are exchanged at least once a month. Religious sects must give proof of their crusading zeal in the name of Martyrdom."

"What next!"

"Hear then what comes next! They've instituted the Ministry of Strikes. The minister's role is to unleash mass-bargaining power through organised strikes. With production under control, the price-index of consumers'—goods remains under his thumb. With increase in the per capita income, there's proportionate increase in national reserves."

"That's what's called inflation."

"Speeches are inflated with news of the rather-belated appointment of the Minister of Bribery and Corruption. His main business is to ensure that no work in any ministry is got done without greasing palms and under-the-table deals. The electorate must not forget: Cupidity alone breeds the thing they call respect!"

Karim's head began getting dizzier and dizzier with the growing volume of Sanjay's volubility and what all could come within its ambit. How could he be retrieved from Hell's Domain?

"One more's added to the list: The Minister of People's Stupidity. They must learn to listen to the powers that be, not to think for themselves at all. Thinking is ruinous specifically for the virtuous Dutiful Brigades."

In a frenzy of fury, he flung his hand out to clutch his friend's arm. "Lead me elsewhere, O Messenger of Death! This is too much for me. I cannot go beyond this range. You've led me in here. Lead me out of here now."

Karim's mind was in turmoil. After so many days was Sanjay finding the use of his limbs: but consciousness was still way behind. He was in fact trembling with uncontrollable anger. All that he could do in the abject position of an attendant was to shift from the head to the foot of the bed and by habit, to massage the soles of the patient's feet.

Absolutely exhausted after this outburst, Sanjay seemed to have subsided into the much-needed blissful sleep. Karim got up and drained off a glass of water. He was just about to relax with a sigh of relief on his own cot, when his precious patient demanded attention again: "Listen!" So indeed he did. "Death's horoscope is phased in three form isn't it? The first, *Dharma*—when for days on end, the soul can find no body to house in the second, *Sambhog*—when it finds the body it once possesed... or one closely resembling it. It has no flesh. The illusion is sustaind no less."

Karim did not consider himself qualified to comment on the continuance of such metaphysical analysis beyond the range of his experience. "The third stage is *Nirman,* when the soul finds manifestation in another body again on earth."

"Probably." he uncertainly ding-donged in.

"You also told me that even those who do not strive after *Nirman* get *Nirvana*. I do not want *Nirvana*. I want to go back to earth. Give me back my body. I want to return and write all about the Harrowings of Hell. I am dying to get the feel of the pen in my hand once again."

Unable to rein his feelings any longer, he leaned over and gave Sanjay a tight bear-hug. "Come... come... back to earth. See how much your friend craves for your company." And pressing his head to his heart, Karim burst into a fit of sobs.

"Forty-nine days are over." Sanjay's voice had been squeezed out of the depths it had been wandering in. "Where am I?" It was nearly normal. But again it seemed to have got stuck in his throat.

"Here... by the side of your friend, Karim."

"Am I in the Third Stage."

"Yes... you are."

"And you are Karim?"

"Yes, I am Karim."

"That's exactly what I wanted. A rebirth in Karim's house."

"You are my son... both son and friend to me." More words got choked by the lump that had risen in this throat.

Whether the nighmare he had been through had probably been too much, or he had virtually travelled a long way to the Third Stage of Rebirth—this actual position he was in appeared to give his weary body the desperately-needed rest and his worn-out soul the desperately-needed serenity.

Pale shades of dawn had slowly changed the skyline when Karim softly lifted his head and shifted it as restfully as possible back on to the pillow. Before he lay down to stretch his own back, he held both his hands up in prayer. 'A thousand thanks, O Lord, for Thy Compassion. Great is Thy Glory!' And in a spirit of rejoicing, he felt that these hands of his had brought the very stars down and left the heavens bare.

Directly his eyes opened and turned towards Sanjay's cot, his sight knocked against it with a shock and fell onto the floor. Sanjay was neither here nor there.

Karim's hands and feet went limp. His eyes wandered, wondering where in the greying blanknesses above, would the other soul be.

Returning to areas nearer, his heart missed a beat on discovering the front-door to the courtyard, ajar.

Regaining control and command over himself, he sprang out. The street was still. All was quiet. He sprinted across to the main road. Even the dust had not raised itself from its night-dew rest.

Leaving the barren land to the left, he took from among the streets the one to the right—the one that led to the ruins on the fringe of the settlement. He allowed his feet to take the direction chosen. Disbelievingly be sought Sanjay. Could those feet he had thought to be his, have suddenly been sprung into action? Had he taken to his heels that way? No other could possibly open out to view.

Then he was able to figure out a human form... perched atop a heap of stones. More like a statue it looked: hewn and carved out of the base rock. He knew the whole place around like the back of his hand. He was certain there was no whole or part of a statue anywhere there. Yet his eyes blinked. Perhaps he was being led on by a hallucination. He nearly tripped over the loose end of the wrap that had got caught under his feet. A stone rolled down and broke the tranquillity reigning supreme. And with that, the statue magically came to life. With winged feet as it were, he flew to the spot. Sanjay as spontaneously rested his head against his shoulder.

When he overcame the throat-constricting emotional upsurge, Sanjay's soft voice wafted into his ears. "I still can't believe it—my friend. Are you and I in the same world?"

"What a nightmare have I been through getting you back!" Karim brushed off the tears springing into his eyes.

"I still can't tell dreams from reality." Sanjay's gaze went deep into his friend's face as he prodded him with both his hands. "Is it your house I've woken up from?"

"Sure it is. I had to bring you away from your room. How long could you have lain delirious there?"

"I saw you lying on that bed. I touched you too. I couldn't for the life of me make out where I was."

"Why didn't you shake me awake?"

"I had to pinch myself to find out where I was in the first place. I was bewildered in surroundings I'd never seen during my waking hours.

"Let's go home. They'll be worrying their heads off if they wake up and find us missing."

Sanjay rose, took a step and stopped "You don't know where all I've been. From a voyage to the 'Land-of-no-Return'."

"You don't have to tell me that. Just swear you'll not zoom off again."

"We all have to one day," Sanjay quipped lightly. "But... but how did you track me down?" He was seriously curious now.

"However I did is beside the point. The point is, do you know exactly?"

"Sure I do. They call it the 'Land-of-no-Return'. I must have popped off when the fever shot up. I must have been delirious. You'll get goose-flesh... cold feet... if I told you a fraction of it all."

"Just tell me," Karim hesitatingly asked, "why did you keep harping on the forty-nine days?"

"Didn't you know of the belief that for forty-nine days does a dead man's soul remain suspended before he can be recalled to earth?"

"You've been mighty lucky, my dear friend! In four or five days you've succeeded where others might or might not have. Had you taken your full quota of forty-nine days," Karim could afford an honest man's laugh now, "I would've had to follow you the whole way through. As things have turned out, I've stood my ground and been calling out for you."

Sanjay's eyes now welled up. He imagined what hell his friend must have gone in and out of for his sake and the sacrifices he must have made. And his head bowed in salutation to his nobility.

"What prompted you to this place of all?"

"I just had lost my bearings. One door I saw. I pushed it open and out I was in the street! There was nothing to my left. As I advanced cautiously to the right and saw this scene of desolation, I wondered whether the world had gone into ruins and all life snuffed out of it since I'd left, or...."

Karim gave him a tighter bear-hug than that of the night before. "I know only one thing—had you not come back, it would indeed have been a scene of desolation—and of woe, for me!"

They were at the turning to their place when Sanjay completed the sentence for his friend.

"For me there'll be time enough to relate details. What I must tell you first of all is the 'mirror-episode' of my travels. In it you could hark back to the past. And when I did—do you know you were the first person I came across?

"That proves the claims of friendship, doesn't it? See! Even after death you could not erase me or Meeta from the tablets of your memory."

"How do you know I saw Meeta many times?" Sanjay broke in unceremoniously at that point.

"From you only. You kept nattering away about her in your dreams."

"Gloria in Excelsis. And what more?"

"So much more."

"As for example?"

"We'll sit and talk. How often, who knows?..."

Karim sensed the stunned silence in the atmosphere directly they entered the door. To boost their courage and morale, he full-throatedly announced: "My friend's come back to life! See Barkatay! See Nehmatay! Meet my two wives, Sanjay. And these four... their kittens."

Sanjay raised his hand in salaaming them. Looking at Shirin and Jamila, he cut in with the contradiction: "These two are surely cats... not kittens any more."

In a festive mood, Karim fed in more information. "I perfectly agree. As perfect must've been the prayers she was at last night in a dark cell."

Shirin bit the corner of her red veil in the effort to grapple with her coyness. And getting away from what could well have turned out to be an embarrassing situation. She moved towards the kitchen. "Can I get some tea for you, Abba?"

All of them were relaxing over a morning cup of tea when the doctor arrived on a routine visit. Karim jumped up and politely helping by relieving him of his bag, chuckled: "The jab's to be in my arm, Doctor Sahib... or I'll go mad with joy."

The doctor rubbed his eyes. Was that really Sanjay sitting on his string cot next to Karim's under the cool neem-tree shade in the corner? Sanjay looked intently in turn at the doctor's face and concluding that he must have been under his

treatment, put the cup on the floor under the bed to stand up with hand extended.

"Congratulations, Sanjay Sahib! Hearty greetings for coming back to the world of homo sapiens." The doctor shook hands.

"I've been jabbering away a good deal, it seems." Sanjay's eyes twinkled, "if you so refer to 'the world of homo sapiens' for my benefit."

"What were the prismatic colours of that sphere of yours—let me recount: blue, red, yellow. But never mind. We'll sit one day and talk of all that. For the final time just stretch your arm... fold it now. That's right... and I'll give the prick. Tomorrow, if you will, you can travel to my clinic for a thorough check-up. We mustn't take any chances."

Karim thrust his arm out and laughed. "This is a fair exchange. Let him wait hand and foot on me for three or four days for a change. Then we'll...."

"Full marks to you on your stamina. My medicines couldn't have done half as much as your nursing. You've really wrought the miracle." The injection over, a tonic was prescribed.

"I too really feel I've come back to life because of him."

"Hardly," Karim clipped short the glowing compliments. "I give credit to his pen that got stuck. About turn then! He'd got impatient. He had literally to get the hell he'd been in out of himself. That's why he really returned to the world of homo sapiens—in which for all its failings, at least one can sit down and write."

Sanjay had been his normal self for a full three days when, on rising, he joked, "I find I've an itching-palm this morning."

Karim's sense of humour matched his. "Where are you, girls? Shirin! Jamila!" he called out. "Bring the bags quickly!"

Sanjay looked enigmatically into his face as he carried on in the same spirit: "Ah! Here you are! When palms itch, money comes. So hold open the mouths of the bags. He's going to rain in some."

"Those hands are different!" Sanjay caught on. "It's not 'easy come' with the likes of us. We have to earn it. I've been a guest so long. Time I went back to my digs and began working."

Karim rubbed his palms hard. "Mine too are itching to get to the grind."

"Had you taken leave?"

"I had to. A few days extra I'd taken. Just in case.... What day of the week is it?"

"Tuesday."

"Tuesday through Sunday. I've six days more to go." Karim counted on his fingers lest he make a mistake. "My working week begins on Monday as per calculations."

"Has it been leave without pay or...."

"I had earned leave to my credit, but the boss wasn't too willing. 'I have to have it...' said I 'with or without pay'.—So I left it at that. Rather vague, isn't it? Not that it matters. Leave's been recorded. That's what does." Karim hadn't quite finished when Sanjay fell a thinking—Had he taken a loan or pawned some trinket to pay the doctor's mounting bills? Gulping down the tea as fast as he could, he suggested: "What about cancelling it? Let's go together to the press. I'll probably be lucky to get some proof-reading."

"Right-o then. I'll go alone and report for duty. If there's anything by way of proofs, why I'll carry the sheets back home. I won't allow you to exert yourself. By bus or bicycle. That's clear." And adhering to his words, called out: "Would you good women give me a food-packet?... And would you, my son, check on the air-pressure in the cycle-tyres?"

* * *

Karim arrived rather unexpectedly at the press. From the warmth with which the boss looked at and greeted him, "It's wonderful seeing you back at work, Karim Mian." he was obviously welcome. But as quickly was the cooling off felt... as if with the thought: 'These workers mustn't know how dependent we are on them. Their heads are in the air, as it is,' and he ticked him off: "There's no knowing when or how long you people'll sit at home. You get your salaries. Does it ever occur to you that we have time-bound orders?" The voice shrank from the additional assumption that the employee had come for further extension of leave. "Did it ever occur to you that you ought to have gone through the credentials of the ass

you pushed in on us? Has he ever so much as heard of a cylinder press—let alone worked at one?"

"He was your own choice. Certainly not mine. You only said that you'd hand-picked him as machineman and that he'd picked up along the line."

"When did I say he hadn't worked here? When he worked here, did we have a cylinder-press? You said you'd put him under your apprenticeship."

"I only obeyed orders. I spent the day putting him through the whole drill. Did the ass go and kick with his hind legs?" Karim could not hold himself back from sputtering.

The boss stiffened uneasily over this turning of tables. "But if it's more leave you're after you won't get it. Get that straight!" the upshot came, pointblank.

"Who said I'd come for more leave? I was really due back on Monday next. But I said to myself: the mission I'd undertaken being over, there's no sense in idling the rest of the time away."

The boss instantly glowed with warmth. "Okay. Cut the cackle out and get down to the job. What's lined up for today must be out today!"

Karim left the office and nodded his head in greeting at the compositors concentrating on their type-trays under the chequered-shade of the feathery-leafed trees. He changed into his overalls on reaching the machine-room, and seeing two new faces behind the trays held at the ready, had a friendly word for them too. "Work's been on the increase, it seems. Well... well. And what may your good names be?"

"Banta and Santa," One of them replied. "The boss drives a hard bargain, doesn't he? He's taken us on a contract basis. No salary."

Karim loaded the machine with their handiwork. "Be grateful you're gainfully employed. What do you want appointment letters for? For them to be framed and hung on walls?"

Both stood by him a moment before they drew his attention to the compositors all in row outside. "Those are the ones on regular salaries. And what's their output? Four pages a day! Bah! And look at us! We wear our fingers down to the bones. Simply because we're on contract!"

"And what's wrong with that? The more the honey, the sweeter the syrup. Your money earned, in other words, it'll be determined by the number of pages you compose."

Banta was stung to the quick. "You've forgotten, my dear fellow, you think of us when you get stuck. Otherwise it's the salaried lot that, like our proverbial sons-in-law, get the loot. Work or no work, they carry their packets home on the first."

Karim fed the paper into the machine and then realised he had not checked on the number of copies. Overhearing the commentators on his way to the boss for the purpose, he came in upon them pat. "You forget, my friends—the salaried are equated with sons-in-law, good workers with sons."

During the half-hour that Karim sat munching his lunch among his co-workers on benches—each with his small tin or plastic box on his lap — and rebuking them: "Why the heck, damn you, don't you work? Don't you see the bottlenecks?"

One of them sniggered. "It's the wind. We move with the wind. We're not, like you, a goody-goody embodiment of Virtue."

"You're mighty smart for your years, my son!" Karim bit off his voice with the bite in his mouth, "What about putting me wise on whoever's stuffed with vice?"

Another puffed up: "We've learnt the 'go-slow' tactics of big government office-types!"

"And what, pray, are their good functions?"

"To mess and mass up backlogs."

"I see!"

"You can't see!" Another compositor butted in. "You don't understand these ways, Uncle."

"You're quite, right my dear nephew! How you block work and loosen tongues... is indeed beyond me!"

"Are you suggesting that we mustn't stand up for our rights?" Yet another grew hotter than the rest.

Karim kept his cool. "You addressed me as 'Uncle'. Mustn't you listen to an uncle then? When did I say you 'mustn't stand up' for your 'rights'? Come on.... Tell me."

"That's what you mean."

"I mean nothing of the sort. What I mean is only he who uses his hands for work has the right to use his tongue for rights."

"Whoever gave anything without asking?

"Give up then! Resign and go—if he doesn't give what you think you rightly ask for."

"Catch any one of us doing that! With jobs going scarce would we add to the millions unemployed? The kick we get out o' here is that we can snarl and growl at the one who feeds us. That's what comes out of security of service. Who can throw us out nowadays? Let him just try!"

The others looked at him appreciatively: as if he had let fall pearls of wisdom. And so another had the guts to string in tightly: "That's what's unions are for, aren't they?" And as if turning around for applause, piled on: "What have you to say? Am I not right?"

Karim put the lid back on his box. "Whoever first thought up the mass bargaining-power of unions must have known which way his bread was going to be buttered best! He must have feathered his own nest for good rest. He must have seen how slogan-mongering worked, not how sloth must rust the springs of the human machine. Tell me one thing."

"What?" they descended on him in chorus.

"One's gone deaf hearing about increase in salaries, dearness and city allowances every time strikes are organised. Have those who've gone on strike ever undertaken proportionate increase in work? The hikes and perks they keep clamouring for are all very well.

"Tell me. Has anyone?"

They scoffed at the depth of seriousness in Karim's voice. One chortled: "All government employees are the sons-in-law of the government. The chairs are the daughters. Those who sit on chairs are sons-in-law only of a higher order. Therefore I say to you: be sons of the soil—You'll feel for your country only then. Sons-in-law don't have sentiments." Karim sighed deeply and his voice deepened. "But how can I chastise you when the most sinister sons-in-law of the country are her ministers?"

That raised a general guffaw—out of which one piped in, "Where'd you gone for your hols, Uncle? You've learnt mighty fine wisecracks. Enough to win an election.... Honest to God—we'd all vote for you."

The bell rang. The lunch-break was over. And one by one, they laughingly, languidly fell into their respective places.

The second half of the working day tuned in somewhat to the rhythm and beat of the machines and other gadgets. But at around six in the evening as they were on their way out, the quiet burst with a big bang!

They ran to a man towards Karim's machine-room where it came from. He held the tins belonging to Banta and Santa above his head and brought them down with a bang again on a wheel. "Do you... damn you... feed lead to your chicks and hens when you get back home?"

All understood the insinuation at once. The typesetters had packed their boxes pretty well. Such pilferage was the order of the day. But Karim stood his ground firmly. Then one fellow-traveller glided a few steps towards the boss's office—just to be doubly sure that he had really seen him leave about half an hour back—before he moved up to the central figure of the scene, "Let go!" He shook his elbow. "What great good are you going to do? Why do you want to get involved?"

Another knew Karim's character as well. "Let him pay for his sins. Why must you lose your peace? His sins upon his head."

The culprits were cleverly out to make capital out of such a situation. "Birds of a feather must flock together." They confronted him. "What's the big deal, eh? What's the difference between you and us, eh? We're all subs, aren't we? Why are you grubbing for the government advocate's role, eh?"

That was a real good one—the 'government advocate' part! One by one they all bit into it with keen relish. 'One worker must stand by another, brother, and truly advocate his cause.' 'Why must you solicit the governmental?' 'What'll you gain out of standing up for the boss?'

Karim paused to stretch out his voice from the tears and rage engulfing it. "Yes—I here and now take on the accusatorial role!" It was an impassioned opening. "Honesty's the one and only law governing me. Why me alone? Each one of you is bound by it. But who ever labelled you 'the working-class'? The function of the working-class is to work, not to rob."

Sensing a stunned, diverted attention, Karim stopped. The boss had suddenly appeared in their midst and the men who had seen him nudged and kicked those who had not tried slinking away. And with that instinctive shifting of ground,

their interest shifted away from Banta and Santa too. They had no intentions of risking their jobs for theirs. Purposefully for the intruder's ears, one took to impromptu soap-box oratory. "Serves them right. Inducting people they don't know serves as a good eye-opener. Why'll those who're here today and gone tomorrow care a hoot for his concern? All they're bothered about is filling one set of pockets with their earnings from here and filling another set with what they can grab and run away with."

The boss did not take long in putting two and two together. From the words heard and the boxes in Karim's hand seen, his gaze jumped to the pair and summoned them to his office.

Karim mutely turned and began washing up at the handpump. The others awaited their turns when one ran in, all fire and fury. "Did you hear what they told him? Brazen lies. Because we could not stand them, they said WE filled their boxes with types to incriminate them!"

'Hell and damnation!' Tempers rose to tempestuous heights. 'Blast the fellows!' 'The rogues!' 'The rascals!'

Karim quietly thrust in on an earlier note. "One worker must stand by another, musn't he? Now which one of you's going to advocate the worker's cause? I'm advocating the government's."

"The tables have been turned on us today—Uncle Karim." Some at the back snickered.

* * *

Shirin stood anxiously under a tree in the street when she sighted Abba at a distance, cycling back from the press. Seeing him, she grew more worried. So to hide her face for as long as she could, she moved nearer to the tree-trunk where the evening twilight coupled with the foliage, got denser.

He was still a good few hundred metres away when she saw him slow down, turn and go back. "Abba!" she involuntarily cried out knowing fully well that it was impossible for her voice to reach his ears. Her fears however were part allayed on seeing him turn again and resume his cycling back home.

Astounded by her presence outside, he braked quickly and got down. "Nothing's happened, I hope. Why are you here?"

"Why did you turn back?"

"I'd clean forgotten to bring some proofs. The whole day I was so busy. Things kept happening. I remembered and turned—only to realise that the press would in any case be closed. I'd have to wait until tomorrow. But why, I asked you before—why for mercy's sake, are you standing here?"

"Abba," Shirin just could not bring the words to her lips.

"Out with it, child. What is it?"

"Abba, Mother's scared. So am I. You'll boil over on us. But how are we to blame?" she hesitatingly began and quickly rattled off.

"I detest riddles. Never had a head for them. Tell me straight. What's wrong? Who's blaming whom?" Karim flared up.

"He.... He's gone. We don't know where." Shirin broke into tears.

"Who? Sanjay?"

Shiring nodded. "Amma tried her best. He just wouldn't listen. He said he'd be back in no time... before you returned. But he hasn't."

Karim stood his cycle against the trunk of the tree and looking across the road, asked, "How long back was that?"

"Hours back. In the afternoon. I've been waiting here since. Amma sent me out to look for him." Shirin was uncertain of the speed with which she was to pass on the news. "Amma's scared out of her life. Should something happen to him, you'll."

Karim gave her a strange look, but soon had the sense and sanity to realise that there was no point taking it out on her. "He's obstinate. Once he makes up his mind, the Lord God Himself above could have a tough time tackling him. You go home. Go."

Shirin would not budge. "But he said he'd back before you."

"He said that, did he? Was he scared of me for playing truant?" Karim was a trifle amused at the fleeting thought.

"He was...." Seeing the mood her father was in now, Shirin was more communicative. "He made us swear we'd keep his going out a secret. He'd tell you about it himself, he said."

"Look! Look there. There he is! Cycling down as if he were running a race. Out of fear—he's at that breakneck speed. He's probably afraid I'm already back. Before he can make it."

Shirin strained hard in the direction indicated. "Is that him? Too far to make out for sure."

"Undoubtedly. I have eagle-eyes. I can't be wrong." Karim laughed happily. "Thank God, he's back—safe and sound." And he stepped out from the darkness into the road where he could be distinctly seen. Not to be easily evaded either, Sanjay got down sheepishly and stood—head bowed. "And where to had Your Highness gone?" Karim tautened up with a tinge of sarcasm in this mode of address.

"Very far—from death's own domain. I told him that I'd be keeping you waiting. that I mustn't be kept away long... that you'd get angry with me."

"Really! That was very considerate of you—I must say!" Living his part, Karim acquired a stentorian tone. "Isn't this friendship of yours with Death going a bit too far? I'll have to end it dictatorially. Once and for all."

Sanjay took the elder's hands in his. "Nothing's beyond you, I'm sure." His voice was counterposingly soft. "If you can act as the Messenger of Death himself and get me out of Death's jaws and claws, what can you not do?"

Karim melted down and searched his friend's face with his eyes. Shirin acted fast in devising a way out to a solution. "From morning, he'd been at the papers you'd been writing when he was very ill."

At that, Karim burst into uproarious laughter. "Oh, I see! So you been through the Harrowings of hell. I'd written in my broken Urdu: a script that you cannot anyway read. How could you have known?"

"I found out the Archangel who deciphered it for me."

Shirin added by way of explanation: "Amma read it all out to him."

Karim led the way, cycle in hand, into the house. Barkatay forthwith spouted: "He... whatever he means to you—left this place. For where, I cannot say."

"Come along in—whatever-you-mean-to-me!" Karim called out to Sanjay and then jocularly bent to her. "I've found 'whatever-he means-to-me' once. Don't you dare let him go out of your clutches another time. I may not be so lucky!"

Barkatay was intensely relieved seeing Sanjay enter. "Then you'd better arm me with a pair of handcuffs." she turned on her husband. "That's the only way to keep him from running away."

Karim was in an even lighter mood. "Barkatay! He's not poor Karim Qadir to submit to handcuffs at you hands!"

Barkatay thought it wise to act the housewife now and dutifully get down to fixing some tea for them both. Nehmatay was not the one, however, to let her man have the last word. "And are you talking of yourself? You've had one hand linked to Barkatay, the other to me. All your life yet you've been fluttering. What's come of it?"

Sitting down on one of the cots she had set down for them, Karim was mock-heroic. "Our sages had the wisdom of the ages in them when they prescribed four wives—one for each hand; one for each foot. Shackled by hand-cuffs and fetters where could a man go?"

Nehmatay drew a little water from the handpump. It was still too warm. Lowering the bucket into the well for some cooler, she made it clear, she was not to be outwitted. "What about two more then? Poor you. You mustn't leave the world with such longings still in heart!"

Pulling down a couple of towels from the line and filling up the cool water she expressed her reservations. "Hindu women are better by far."

Sanjay began washing his hands, face, and feet. Karim merely splashed some water in his eyes and came out with the rejoinder.

"And how, pray, do you say they are better? With us the sweetness grows. With them no question of seconds, thirds, and fourths. One's sour enough. And enough my dear women, is enough."

More laughter so sprinkled through the earlier heaviness—that is, before the men came home—made the atmosphere lighter.

Shirin put the two glasses of tea she had brought, before them. Karim recounted the happenings of the day. "Because of all those goings-on, the question of asking the boss for proofs just slipped from my mind."

"Not to worry. I've managed to get some work for translation." Sanjay attributed the reason of his going out in search of that. And on his way back, he had gone to his place and had it cleaned up. He attributed the reason for his delay in returning to that.

"I'd guessed you'd been there from the cycle under you," Sanjay did not really hear that observation. He went on: "I thought I'd spend the night there. Without taking leave of you, I couldn't. I'm awaiting orders!"

"What now, my friend! I've never played games of princes and slaves. I do not know therefore who is to give orders and who is to obey them. I only know that the doctor's insisted on another four day's care and rest. These two begums will, like foster-mothers, nurse you back to health I'm sure with chicken-soup-and-barley and whatever else."

Sanjay could say nothing to that.

Shirin was removing the empty glasses when Jamila excitedly cried out. "Look, Shirin! Your plant's budded! Here are jasmines." The elder sister sprang up to see the flowers for herself and ran back fast in a hurry.

"Abba! Will you give me fifty paise? Please! Daily."

"Fifty paise? Whatever for, child?"

"I got this plant from Uncle Atay. I'm not going to ask him for another. The man with the pushcart sells at fifty paise each."

Okay, okay!" Karim inattentively brushed her aside. "Go and buy it. I'll give you your fifty paise tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow, Abba!" Shirin demanded full attention. "A plant a day—I'd said... I'll have a border all round this courtyard. I'll have the place full of flowers within a month."

Karim's eyes lit up with an unusual glint. Shirin took it that he had given in. Actually, his mind had reverted to the instant he had overheard Nehmatay's comment on the neem. Hacking a tree down was an omen he associated with death. Shirin had charmed it away with the magic of a plant that now had grown and borne sweet-scented flowers. The time had come when he could sit back and relate the entired episode with a radiant face to Sanjay.

* * *

After Karim left for work the next morning, Sanjay pored over his work in the neem-tree-shaded-corner of the courtyard. His concentration having begun to flag after about an hour, he lay down to rest his strained back. Forgetting that fatigue during convalescence comes on much quickly with work of any sort, he ascribed it to the substandard literature in hand. His conscience had always pricked him and his fingers gone numb whenever he had compromised for sordid reasons.

He lay a long time after every three or four pages, pressing each finger, turn by turn, then the whole hand, and then repeating the exercise. He liked the leaves fluttering and frequently falling on him as he lay on his back. And he felt fresh life flowing into him, with such tingling sensation. The wind had probably risen with intoxicating powers—for leaves began falling thicker and faster—and much though he tried to resist it—a heavy sound sleep overcame him.

The tonic effect of a dream then crept into every nerve and cell of his body: he began writing his new novel. Page after page flew from his hand. The glory of it all was that he wrote and wrote and yet could go on writing. Neither fatigue nor frenzy of any kind seized him. Then Karim came and sat by his side for the tea-and-question session: 'And have you thought up the title?' Promptly, he replied: 'Forty-nine days,' and then a miracle happened. His own hand was transformed into paper and words began raining down on it. And he laughed ecstatically and showed his friend how strange things could happen. And then he felt someone holding his shoulder and shaking him awake. It was Nehmatay. "Get up! The drizzle threatens to turn into a downpour. Let me take your cot inside before you're soaked right through."

The dream got blotted out. He scrambled for the sheets he had kept on the wooden-stool. His work literally must have been totally washed out. "Don't worry," Nehmatay set his fears at rest. "Shirin put everything in on time. No harm's been done."

Once inside the room he felt a growing discomfort from the intermittent flashbacks of the dream. Then it struck him that he had really begun worrying from the time Karim had related the events of the day at the press. His casual manner did not in any way discount the significance of what had emerged: that government-servants were like sons-in-law, not sons.

And so had the seed of a new novel been embedded in the subconscious layers of his heart and mind and had begun sprouting out of his entire being like new plant fresh with the dew.

And he thought of the plant Karim had told him about and of the faith that had followed the procreative act of putting it in soil and watering it. That seemed really to have been the rallying-round-point for his health.

And he also thought of Shirin's request the previous night for the 'fifty-paise-a-day month-long-project'. It was indeed a wonderful idea, filling the place with the sweet smell of flowers and greenery all round with a sheen all its own.

The monsoon hadn't quite set in. The first sharp shower had shown up, alas, only its limited power.

Sanjay called out: "Shir...in!"

"Would you like to have some tea?" Shirin sprang in and softly enquired.

"Tea can wait. Let's get the plants first."

"Where on earth from?"

"From where you said you could."

"From Uncle Atay?"

"Okay."

"But...."

"Wouldn't he have come back home?"

"Not that... really...."

Sanjay concluded from her hesitant manner that she was hamstrung for lack of money. "I understand.... Would you please fetch Amma in?"

Barkatay was there in the twinkling of an eye. "She won't listen to me, Amma! You tell her to show me the way to Uncle Atay's."

"For the plants, Amma, but Abba...." she informed her in sign language that money had not yet changed hands.

"The earth's been softed by the rain. No fear of plants dying. Uncle Atay'll tell you as much." Amma couldn't very well refuse permission when he pleaded so.

"Go along then, child. If he's so keen.... We mustn't hurt his feelings!"

And when Barkatay turned to go to her room, he called out: "Can you spare a basket? We'll need something to hold

twenty or so..." That braked her movements. She could probably scrape together a few paise for one plant, but for twenty. The moment of indecision was soon over. A basket was handy. "Just tell Uncle Atay that Abba'll settle accounts himself when he returns."

"Sure I will." Shirin grabbed the basket in complete rapport.

The plants planned for having been arranged carefully in the basket, place was found for a sapling each of peach and pomegranate as well. But when Sanjay offered to pay, Shirin tried holding him back.

"Uncle..."

In full concentration on the basket still, Atay neither heard Shirin call out to him, nor saw Sanjay's hand clamped on her mouth. In as complete absorption, he held out his palm and pocketed the money quickly handed out so he could help with the lifting of the weight.

On their way back, Sanjay gave Shirin a word of advice. "We can't be letting others know the state of our domestic affairs. Abba and I'll sort out such petty-cash budgets between us. Don't you worry your head off."

Shirin felt a little ashamed of herself but at the same time proud of Sanjay for so having asserted himself as virtual member of the family.

On depositing the basket home, it crossed Sanjay's mind that they had no gardening implements at all, so back he hurried to borrow whatever Uncle Atay could spare for an hour to two.

Before he returned, the two sisters had between them measured distances and marked places for him to dig. In rapt admiration then the three of them stood and straightened their backs. An unkempt, nondescript patch had been beautified. A few month's tending could enhance it to God's own good garden! Salamat Maulvi, the elder of the two boys, nearly stumbled headlong from wonder on his return from school. "What are you gaping at, my lad?" Nehmatay chuckled with infectious delight. "Your own father'll stop in his tracks thinking himself to be demented entering another's house—not his own."

Salamat looked at the plants and into Shirin's face, then wagged his finger at her accusatively. "I know her. She must've put in the plants she only likes. She couldn't've thought of me."

Sanjay was eager to appease the boy. In a low voice he asked, "Which plants does he go mad over? Do you know?"

"I do."

"Then why didn't you tell me?" Sanjay's voice rose.

"Why did I have to tell when you had already bought them?"

"Which precisely?"

"Pomegranate."

Sanjay was highly amused. "Fine then. You just keep your mouth shut. Let me manage him."

He lovingly put his arm around the child's neck. "Do you know there's a kind of collyrium—Sulemani's the name—that you put in your eyes. And lo and behold! Whatever plant you wish for drifts in the moment you open them."

"That means," Salamat's lips pouted with controlled sobs, "that she'll put it in her eyes and have jasmines all over."

"I can see my jasmines without the collyrium, my dear boy. The magic collyrium's for those who can't see what they want."

"Forget her," Sanjay patted and petted him. "You just tell me which one you want."

"Pomegranate."

"You can't see any pomegranate sapling at the moment, can you?"

"No.... How can I? They're all her jasmines."

"Right-o then! Let's put a little of this collyrium in your eyes."

"Where is it? Nowhere here. No one has it. It's just a fantastic story from a book," Salamat was sceptically glum.

Both Barkatay and Nehmatay waited in the wings to play up their impromptu parts in this scene. "Come along," Nehmatay endearingly wiped away his tears. "Come with me. You'll see, I have it!"

After he'd had a needle from the silver-container put to each eye, Sanjay led him by the hand to the spot. "See for yourself. This is going to bear the reddest fruit."

"No kidding?"

"Honour bright! Now just tell me why you fancy it"

"Not in front of everybody," Salamat whispered in Sanjay's ear. "I'll tell you at night... before going to bed." Either the whisper wasn't soft enough, or Shirin was too near to hear each word distinctly. "Why wait till bedtime?" she teased. "I can tell him for you right away."

"What can you tell?"

"What I know."

"What do you know?"

"The story Abba told us once."

"Which one?" Salamat smarted under the blow of discovering that he'd been cheated out of his secret, yet he persisted. "You're bluffing. You're just pulling my leg."

"Oh! So I'm bluffing, am I, just pulling your leg, am I? Fine then, hear me!" Shirin clapped her hands victoriously. "It's about a charming fairy who flew out of a pomegranate-blossom." And she laughed. "Are you too waiting to see one fly out? Out of what? The lies stories are packed with?"

"You mean to say... Abba told a lie?" Salamat's faith in his father was visibly shaken.

Barkatay had dished out their lunch. Drawing Salamat to his plate and prodding him into eating, Sanjay worked out an acceptable compromise. "Abba told you no lie. Charming fairies actually fly out from the right pomegranates. Which the right ones are, you can find out only when you're grown up."

The boy looked quizzically into the storyteller's face, but seemed to be waiting: waiting for the time he was to find himself grown up."

And so these notes of expectancy went on being exhanged until the evening-hour when Karim came home and stood in the doorway. "O Most Exalted One! Grant me the right sight, O Lord! Am I entering the threshold of my own home?"

"Even your guest feels at home here, Mian!" Sanjay took the cycle from Karim and stood it on its stand. The day had made him feel fresher and greener from the three hour's fruitful excercise at translation and from the plantation-drive he had with assiduity carried out.

Salamat was in unusually high spirits too. Clinging to his father's arm, he tried extracting an answer to the topical question: "Which is your favourite plant?"

"All these you all have planted."

"Let me put you to the test then," he pointed at the apparent differences. "Which is this one you see? And this? And this?"

"How must I see any differently from you?"

"From me?" The boy was cleary having good fun. "I? I have collyrium in my eyes. Sulemani collyrium—that's given me the power to see the pomegranate plant. Can you?"

Noting how hard the two girls were at muffling their laughter, Karim caught on. "Oh, I see! You're getting to be mighty smart, aren't you? Sulemani collyrium at the age of ten! You're growing up fast, my boy, too fast for me to catch up!"

"You know about it then?" the boy grew wild with excitement over assumedly shared experience.

"Once a lifetime everyone does, my little friend. So did I. At the age of twenty, surely not at your age!"

His curiosity roused further, he swivelled to Sanjay. "Did you too, Bhai Jan?"

"Sure... as your father says..."

"And what did you see?"

"I'll tell you when you've grown up," Sanjay patted the boy's soft cheeks.

This was getting to be just too complex for him. He again swung round to his father and hung on to his neck. "You haven't told me what you saw?"

"Ask me that... I'll answer for him..." Nehmatay butted in saucily. "He came under the spell of a fairy."

"That so?" The boy grew goggle-eyed with quaint thoughts.

Karim folded him up in his arms. "Not one, my child... visions of two began hunting me."

"Two?" This was too much for more words.

"Yes. I put more than was good for my eyes."

And like the morning-shower, laughter wrinkled up faces and sprinkled the place with bountiful flashes from light hearts.

Barkatay put an end to the banter by sending their food out where they sat. And after the meal, Karim handed over the bundle he had brought. "There's no great hurry. Take your own time tomorrow. I'll carry it back the day after."

Sanjay went in and put the assignment with the other papers he had been working at that day and came and sat by Karim's side. "I really feel like flinging all this aside to make a go at the novel I'm simmering with."

"Do you have to tell me that! Why do you think I grabbed at that part of the Messenger-of-Death and dragged you back on earth?"

Karim's hilarity was toned down by the view of seriousness running through Sanjay. "That's a gross misnomer, isn't it? For me you're the Angel of Life. What you said yesterday has speared me right through."

"What exactly?"

"That the most powerful sons-in-law are the leaders of the country. You're not aware of the power-packed truth you've made your random shot at. Had they been sons... true and noble sons... would this be the condition of the country?"

"Who dare dispute that? Worthy sons add their earnings to those of their fathers to run their families better, not to...."

"You probably haven't heard of the Russian myth about the sons-in-law killing the Tsars and seizing the throne of the realm down the ages."

"What about the sons?"

"They never ruled."

"What were they expected to do?"

"To become sons-in-law of other realms and perpetuate the tradition wherever they were."

"I see what you're driving at!"

"What?"

"With twisted relationships from the very start, how was anyone to straighten things out later?"

"That's precisely the dilemma."

"If there was no sancity of life, how was anyone going to take any great care of what was inherited? Unless you earn, how do you learn the value of what you possess? You'll be a spendthrift, won't you?"

"That's exactly what I want to write about."

"Why don't you, then? You know the art."

"I dozed off in the afternoon and dreamt I was at it."

"Forget all this hack-work then. Get down to the essentials."

"Therefore must break I away. Must go back to my digs."

"I understand."

"Do I then take leave of you tomorrow?"

"Certainly. I'll make it a point to look you up on my way back every day."

"And whenever I'm not in a mood to write, I'll cycle it here."

Karim was happy over Sanjay's decision. Actually he had been meaning to have a word with him and had been thinking of him all day, but had forgotten on entering the doorway.

"I must ask your advice."

"What on?"

"I was wondering whether there'd be any point in letting Salamat continue his studies. What can he become after all? Why not initiate him into work? He's ten already."

"Sorry to say—but I totally disagree... my friend. What's the hurry? He's yet too small for work."

"There is a purpose in my trying to get him into the press right from now. If I wait till he matures, he'll have his ambitions and frustrations. He'll know more about the world."

"But surely for even the sort of work you have in mind, a little more of education will take him worlds ahead, won't it?"

"There, probably, you're being practical. But how's the Maulvi's teaching him the reading of the Koran going to help? Sacred books are all very well."

"You mean to say...."

"Get what I mean? A smattering of Hindi and Punjabi is all he needs to now. Then if I push him in as a compositor, in the course of time he'll get a breakthrough. Eight pages a day at rupees three each. Shall we say six if he breaks his back."

"Then leave him to me. Forget formal schooling. Why begin by writing off the best years of the poor lamb's life? I'll get him within days through what they possibly will—if at all, that is—in years."

"Then my headache's over. Silly of me not to have thought of your way out." Karim sat up. Continuing to lie down was impossible, "And... just imagine... I'd decided to take him on the carrier of my cycle from tomorrow itself. He'd pick up fast. He'd find his way through, I had thought."

"On the contrary. He'd be wasting time... a year perhaps."

"More... for sure. They'll probably have him casting types. They'll keep his apprenticeship at that for as long..."

"I'll begin on his from morning. After a month—even if I skip days in between, he'll have enough to carry on with on his own. You'll see for yourself how far he will go."

Childlike, Karim grew impatient. "Just check." "Nehmatay," he called out, "is your son asleep or...."

"What's the matter, Abba? I'm wide awake." Salamat sprang from his bed to his father's.

Karim sat him by his side and held his arm for undivided attention. "If you want to become a man in the real sense, take Sanjay as your teacher. Will you be ready for daily lessons?"

"Then will I still have to go to Maulvi Sahib?"

Before Karim could answer, Sanjay came pat with the answer. "From him you'll be learning Urdu; from me—Hindi, Punjabi, and English."

"And is he going to become a scholarly linguist?" there was a tinge of irony to that now. "What the letters tell should be enough for him." And the accompanying laugh too sounded pretty hollow.

Sanjay tactfully reasoned it out with his friend. "At this age nothing should be difficult. Taking in so much at a time with pleasure should surely lead to a treasure children could grow up to cherish. They don't learn half as fast later, let me tell you that."

"Fine then," Karim thumped his back. "That's settled. From tomorrow, my boy, begin learning well the lingos of the infidels!"

* * *

One day, Karim had set the paper on for galley proofs when, while checking the ink with his own measure of meticulousness, he spotted the year of publication. Whether the book was in Hindi or Punjabi he could not tell, what he could was—each figure. 1968 had been printed when the reprint-order was being complied with in 1978! Not knowing what to do, he took the paper off the cylinder and walked into the Chief's office.

"This seems to be an unpardonable error." He shoved the sheet under the expert's nose and put his finger on the exact spot. The boss was rather casual, taking it to be part of the routine green-signal-drill.

"It's a new edition of the book."

"So I see."

"This printer's devil's been overlooked."

"Let it go. Don't bother!" And he got engrossed in the sheaf of papers on his table. What was such a big thing in Karim's eyes, seemed to be of the least significance to the owner of the press. Not knowing what exactly he was really expected to do, he stood his ground. "It's a matter of a mere few minutes. Why not have it taken out and set right?" he politely suggested.

"No chance," the boss had his mind clearly made up. "Take this off... correct it... put it back on... Bah! It'll all end up by two hours going down the drain. The machines can't be kept idle."

"I've already taken the page off. You've only to tell one of the compositors to change a figure—I wouldn't know of anything more—but that's how it should be."

"The trouble with you. Karim Mian, is that you argue too much." The boss looked at aim fixedly.

"In your own interest. I have nothing to lose or gain personally."

"If you've nothing to lose or gain personally, as you put it, why must you insist on having your way? Haven't I told you once and for all to get on with the printing? Haven't you heard me? Off with you!"

His voice spilt out like ink smudging paper. Karim wondered how he could make head or tail of the pile he was expected to be going through on the table. While supposedly at it, he was possibly being haunted by his conscience of the day when the humble employee standing before him nursing a hurt, had stood with the boxes of stolen leaden letters. The curtness suddenly smoothened into softness. "You're no stranger here. Karim Mian—to you this has always been like your own. The only drawback in you is you argue too much... shouldn't a word to the wise be enough?"

The word hadn't probably penetrated the worker's thick skull. He still stood dumbly on. "You've got to shut your eyes to certain things." A coldness had been cultivatedly creeping into

the voice. "You people would neither understand nor should...." As dumbly he turned to go. "You're basically a good worker." The Chief obviously did not want the day to end on his wrath. "But work's not the only quality looked for in a man. A certain degree of understanding has to be there."

And Karim looked into the face in the chair as if he were trying to get at the understanding being spoken of.

"Never mind for now. Get back to your job." The oily-smooth voice led Karim out although neither his eyes still saw nor did his mind still get at what had been said.

As he came out and was about to enter the machine-room, he noticed Mehar Singh, the oldest compositor, unmistakably standing with his ears to the wall and with an unmistakably waxen expression following him right inside. And when Karim resumed the printing processes, the colleague had a sly edge over him. "And what art 'n craft's been taught in the lesson thrust down your throat?"

Karim stared vacantly into the other's face.

"Then you haven't understood," Mehar Singh was now laughing with a knowledgeable air. "It's simple. It's neither the second nor third re-print, we're at...."

"It's not a re-print? Why am I putting these reams onto the cylinders?" Karim looked at his hands blankly and as blankly at the blank papers.

"Just pretend it's being printed. It's been 'being printed' mind you, from the time of the first order," Mehar Singh cautiously looked behind him and scowled.

Karim was once again too dazed to move one way or the other. "You could decipher the figures only—which you did." The interlocutor had so much to put him wise on. "Shall I read out to you what's written beneath?"

Karim stood paralysed. "Here... look here! The first edition was 1968; the second 1972; the third 1973; the fourth now, 1978.—But still do you see it's being printed 'first edition'?"

"I see!" Karim's eyes showed up a new glimmer of light dawning in them, "It's always been at the 'first' edition stage!" His inked hands wiped his mouth, his lips screwed up from a nauseatingly bitter taste.

Mehar Singh kept his glowing eyes cautiously on the door as he fed in more information now that Karim had come onto a

common wavelength. "And the story goes that when the writer enquires on the 'sales' position, his blessed book does not find a place in the market. The example before you is this '1961 Edition'. Now you understand clearly what I mean?"

"No, I don't," Karim's expression hardened. "Don't rule out the probability of our limited powers of understanding in such big business concerns."

Mehar Singh had heard that when he had stood with his ear to the wall of the boss' office, Karim had been brain-washed pretty well. "You haven't? Are you telling me you really haven't?"

"Our boss always has been printing other's books. Time he wrote one and printed himself. Then he'd know."

"What?"

"Have you heard of *The Ideal Husband*?"

"Of course I have. Only I don't profess to have read this one of the World's Classics Series."

"You remember its counterpart *The Ideal Wife*?"

"That, too, I do."

"The time's ripe now for our boss to sire one—'The Ideal Worker'," Mehar Singh slapped Karim on the back and rolled off as a cog to another wheel in his room. And even from there, the same voluminous voice from the compositors' cabin came as fully charged. Mehar Singh was ostensibly still on the inexhaustible subject of the ideal worker.

After the day's work, however, as preplanned, Karim cycled to Sanjay's. As he climbed the stairs, it struck him that he might be disturbing him. Yet, somehow, he leapt right on to the landing. His feet seemed to have acquired a power all their own.

Seeing him. Sanjay left his pen at the point it was. "Welcome Karim! You've a pretty long life—breezing in like this upon a wish!"

"How long? As long as your novel?"

"My novel's going to be 'Forty-nine Days'. That's not too long, is it?'

"That's too literal. You've going by theme and title! The life of a precious book can run into centuries. It can become a classic."

"Who can say as from now? But what you said is correct."

"Premeditatively. That's why, my dear friend, I said 'as long as your novel'. If you have the 'Messenger of Death' as one of the characters in it, isn't it a foregone conclusion that I'll live as long as the book's read?"

Sanjay laughed. "I'm sure I couldn't've calculated better."

Karim took of his shoes, put his feet up, and relaxed on the divan. "I was a bit hesitant. I didn't want to be disturbing you when you'd be in the throes of your creativity. And that's what's happened precisely. I feel guilty. You've put away your pen."

"But you haven't yet asked why I wished you long life."

"You must just've thought of me."

"Then how pray, are you disturbing? I thought of you because my pen could move no more. It had to be given a push to. My batteries too needed recharging—I could sit and chat with you."

"Then call out to the caretaker first. Let him first bring us two glasses of tea from your corner-shop."

"Why should I send for tea? Let me have the pleasure of treating ourselves to some of our taste. Here, I've acquired a stove. It's long since I heard you sing Bule Shah! By the time you've got a strain or two through, tea'll be right here!"

"Gone are those days, my friend. I'm now thinking of becoming Hazrat Solomon."

"What did you say?" Karim had been preoccupied with the lighting of the kerosene-oil stove and could not be too attentive.

"Just that it's time I accepted the years on my back and came to be called 'Hazrat Solomon'!"

"Who was he, just tell me. Haven't heard of this wizard!"

"Come, come! You should know! Hazrat Daud's son: notable king of Israelites." Karim's eyes twinkled merrily.

"Hail King Solomon! So now your ambition's to become a king, is it? Fine! You a king: I your slave! Only see my friend, your head does not bloat and float up above the skies. Don't forget the day we two sat—indeed as now—over tea and talked."

"Why do I have to go the bother of becoming king? I have other things in mind."

"And what are those?" Sanjay put the glasses on a tray between them on the divan. "Why are you aiming at old Solomon's role?"

Karim sampled the tea. It tasted good. 'Because the Lord God above had His Own Benevolent Eye on him... because He had bestowed upon him a secret power to understand animals."

"And so?"

"It's not the kingship I'm after, it's the animal kingdom I want to understand."

"Which in particular—my fine-feathered friend? Does your understanding have to include knowledge of the cheep-cheep-cheep of sparrows? The chirrup-chirrup-chirrup of pheasants? The coo-coo-coo of doves? Or does it have to include all birds and fowls?" Sanjay clasped his friend's hands tightly.

And Karim came out with the story of the day. "Now tell me, if I am to develop this degree of understanding, I am to have the secret power the Lord God had bestowed upon King Soloman. Am I not to?"

* * *

For payment of rent, food and overhead expenditure, much against his will, Sanjay undertook as much translation and proof-reading work as he possibly could. Taking this thirsty life with him, he then sat beside the bank of the river flowing with thoughts.

He had been bathing in his mind's river and feeling more and more relaxed ever since the day he had begun writing: on his soul's journey beginning from death through forty-nine days after, partly as per his experience and partly as based on the Tibetan philosophy he had earlier on read. But for so many days now, this world of imagination had been the world he really had been living and revelling in even as he wrote about it... from the time the soul renounces the body and drifts though the hazy bluish-grey light. Of this, he wrote as faithfully as he could, with as keen an imaginative conceptual power as possible. Feathers seemed to have sprouted from his body in place of limbs.

The first phase was fine. From the second onwards—with the azure light giving way to the seven-hued rainbow—red-hot needles seemed to prick his entire body. He also saw Meeta swing on the rainbow precisely as he had seen her in his delirium. And as he faithfully continued to record his experiences, she so took possession of his being that the place seemed permeated with her spirit.

And he thought of her existence on the face of the earth as his—and of her existence in the topmost room of the same huge building in which so many others, besides himself, lived. He shoved aside his novel, returned the seven-hued rainbow to the heavenly domain it belonged to, and lay on the divan to recapitulate the days when she actually was alive.

And hey presto! Her feathers suddenly transformed into limbs of flesh and blood and his youthful arms ached for her.

She did not exist anymore. Any awareness that he had of her presence, was contained solely within his subjective state. And he tautened. And he repined. Why had he not ever made it a life-and-death affair to possess her? Why was a debt to the dead being made with life? He knew he had met her only when she stood at death's door. The threshold was still on earth. Real. As real as any part of the earth. Why then had he allowed it to crumble and let her go way?

He collected himself into a sitting posture, lit a cigarette and thought: "According to Tibetan philosophy I have lived through the stages I had to pass through after death. Why while I am still alive? All that's left after death is the soul: that, as believed, is fire and air and therefore intangible."

Like the line of smoke from his cigarette, Sanjay's body shook. And he thought—"How can flesh and blood be transformed into traditional beliefs? And how did I go by traditional beliefs even when she was alive? Two souls met. Why did not two living bodies meet?"

And like the ashes his cigarette had been reduced to, a form of his lay heaped upon the divan.

The mercury of the barometer had risen high. He consoled himself: My dear friend Sanjay, why can't you waken up to the fact that she was married and that she had an incurable disease? How, pray, could you have possessed her either way?

The heat of the night had by now been overpowered by the coolness of the early morning. And with the heady-fresh rising vapours he sank his dozing head into the pillow on the despondent deduction: "I'll never, never in my life know what it is to touch my beloved."

Sanjay had neither fixed timings nor fixed days for teaching Salamat. He went whenever he felt he could spare a couple of hours at the least. And regardless of whether or not he could make it on other days, his most earnest effort was to be there on Sundays since meeting Karim was always an additional attraction.

On this particular Sunday, however, the creative fit had so seized him that it was almost afternoon when he felt free. The sun was blazing hot. Yet he braved it by bicycle, speeding up as fast as he could pedal.

He had turned into the street and was only three houses away,when someone called: "Sanjay Mian! Your Karim Lala is sitting here with us." Dismounting, he directly reversed. An old man stood in a doorway beckoning him in where, to be sure, his friend sat on a cot philosophically smoking a hookah.

"Come on right in. No formalities at friend Fateh's." Karim rose and took care of the bicycle by leaning it against the door.

Sanjay was tickled to a chuckle. "That's great! 'Lala'—the favourite with Hindus in apposition to 'Karim'... and Mian'—the favourite with Hindus in apposition to my name!"

Fateh unwound the string round his ear that served as part of the broken frame and took his spectacles off. Tightening the stringframe, he casually remarked: "I've always addressed him as 'Karim Lala' and you 'Sanjay Mian'! What's the difference? You're both friends. Courtesy titles and handles to names can be dropped among friends. I thought a fair exchange would be exciting!"

Sanjay instantly took an instinctive liking to the old man. He was spontaneously entertaining.

"I'd always thought you were Tula the potter. I never knew..."

"That I was Fateh Mohammed! 'Fateh' for 'victory'. My father fondly thought that I'd go high in life.... Ironically 'Fateha'—that's the last prayer they say among us Muslims, before a burial—is what it's been splintered to... That's why

they say, my name should've been Tula. But Sanjay Mian..." Fateh clinched what was in his mind... yet his lips kept moving.

"He's now almost immobilised. A broken man. There was a time when heads turned to compare the necks of his decanter-shaped pots with the swan necks of young girls." In sharing a grief time had not helped in overcoming, Karim made a feeble effect to smile by bringing to mind a pleasant phase of the past, but stared abjectly into an abysmal vacuum.

"You're speaking the truth, Sanjay Mian...." Fateh was heroically reclaiming hold over himself. "Now, just a moment, how weak my memory's grown!—What was his name—the name I mean of the rich young man from somewhere in Central Asia?"

"Is it Izzat Beg, you mean?" Karim helped him out. "As handsome as a fairy-tale prince he was—going by our 'Sohni' folktale! The first sight of this village-belle ensnared him! What a spell she must have cast over him! He never could think of returning to his homeland. He never did."

Fateh sighed deeply. "He must have drifted in on the wings of his Fate just as Sanjay Mian has alighted at my house this blissful day! Karim Lala—who can deny now—does not this friend of your capitivate hearts like the same now proverbial Prince?"

Karim smiled, looking narrowly at Sanjay as he wove the tale on and on with the character present. "So! He's another Izzat Beg in your eyes—is he? As the Lord God above is our witness, speak the Holy Truth: Had your daughter Salma been alive and with us now, would this, our Prince, have been acceptable to you?"

Sanjay looked from the one to the other. The allusions meant nothing to him. Fateh had raised his hands in resignation. "I'm an unfortunate man, Karim Mian! Why must you sprinkle salt on my wounds?"

Karim told Sanjay in a low, soft voice about his luckless friend. "First, he lost his beloved wife, then after years of the loving care he had not spared himself in raising his only daughter to fresh, blooming youth, Salma followed her mother. Such are the ways of the Almighty! He can never also blot her out of his mind—So griefstricken is he! It's of her only he's talking about."

Sanjay felt heartily sorry for Fateh. Far too moved for words, he felt as if he had lost a Sohni in Salma—after that comparison of Izzat Beg with him ringing in his ears. Sighing, he rose and suggested, "Let's go home. We don't have much time left. I want to get a short lesson through."

"Salamat must be waiting," Karim readily agreed.

"Good son! That's a noble deed you're doing. Taking him home." Fateh went on into details. "He's quarrelled with them. Not a morsel has he eaten. I've lost breath entreating him to take something here. But do you think he'll listen? He hasn't broken his fast."

"What happened, Mian? I've been fasting since morning in the hope I'd have a feast at yours. You're stretching my day. Too bad. Why?"

"Never mind why. We'll be having to fend for ourselves, be prepared! There's been no fire in the grate, no water in the pitcher, no potato or onion bought from the vendor since morning."

"What happened?" Sanjay looked deeply concerned.

"I came to know a secret."

"Really?"

"How King Solomon learnt animal lore."

"How was that? You told me that the Lord God above had bestowed the gift upon him."

"They tell all sorts of lies in books. I've learnt the truth." Karim laughed the laugh of one who knew better and therefore grew bitter.

"Have you had an inspiration?"

"Call it inspiration—if you will. Do you know how many good wives and concubines he had?"

"No—I don't."

"Seven hundred wives, three hundred slaves. What was there so great about his knowing all he did of animals with one thousand woman around?"

"That's what you say. A thousand grains of salt might have helped swallow that."

"Ask Fateh if you don't believe me. Everybody in the neighbourhood heard this morning."

"And have you started all over again?" Fateh was wisely domineering. "It's in the house of the living you are. It takes

two to kick up a quarrel. Some vessels make more noise. And open your ears properly to listen to what more I have to say! Wives are not made of clay. They won't break. They're like brass-plates."

Fateh's laughter over his own simile caught on. Both Karim and Sanjay burst out. And in that mood left.

Mouth-watering aromas greeted their nostrils the moment they entered their door. Nehmatay stood baking bread in the new clay oven they had mud-plastered to the corner of the courtyard away from the rooms. "That's wonderful, little Amma, I was warned I'd be having to fast today!"

From leaning over the oven, Nehmatay's face was already flushed. Hearing Sanjay, it got redder. "Why must the son alone stomach it all? Why can't you teach your good friend a thing or two for a change?"

Karim put a cot down and stretched the point made to a T. "Come on, my friend. If your letters can fill a stomach, let's begin soon. They haven't flung a crust at me since day break."

Nehmatay could hardly contain her laughter at that. She turned her face lest they see. The words spouted had molten lead to them. "Go and sit in other's homes and tell them about yours. And tell me, is that the way wise men should go about?"

"See, brother! How many pages have I transcribed!" Salamat opened his exercise-book on the wooden-stool to count the pages. Sanjay checked the work done and wrote another line for him to write under twenty times. Going in then, he called out: "Big Amma!"

Barkatay nodded in reply. Her eyes were red from weeping; her heart was too full for words. As he came and sat by her side, she slowly poured out all there was to the events of the morning.

Actually, Nehmatay was due for her confinement any day now. From the last week or so, she had been craving for spiced-baked-bread. Barkatay saw to the clay-oven last evening and in the morning was kneading the dough when the younger boy fell and she ran to render whatever first-aid she could. Taking upon herself the completion of the task left in the middle, Nehmatay was shocked to find a small finely knotted thread, tied to which was an eeny-weeny folded bit of paper; you had to use a microscope to read. The discovery crackled and spurted

into a volcanic eruption. The woman was out to harm her with all her spells and charms, she accused. Barkatay's self-defence fell on deaf ears. She was a God-fearing woman—she thumped on that trump card. "Does not He see from above if all below are blind? Let her litter seven sons all at one go! Why should I be jealous of her? I'm quite happy with my Shirin and Dula. Two are more than enough for me." Tears streamed down her blubbered face again. "Maulvi Mian had given me that charm for my rheumatic pains. He had tied it around my own arm. When I was kneading the dough, Dula fell down and I ran to pick him up—it probably then fell off into the dough."

"True.... True.... Everyone was to have eaten the bread baked from it." Sanjay was sympathetic. "Did Karim not explain that to her?"

"Of course he did; so did I. But do you think she would listen? How did she know, she railed and she ranted with her accusation. Wasn't he or I or my two children, I ask you—were we all not to have eaten spiced bread? 'I might have kneaded plain dough for us all,' she said. The blind and deaf woman refused to hear him asking for spiced bread and buttermilk since morning. Isn't he as much her husband as mine?"

Sanjay put an end to the hell fire they were all having to put up with. He drew Barkatay by the arm to the kitchen, sat her down, and set her on to dish out the simple meal for each hungry mouth waiting, while he amused each one, big and small, turn by turn.

The air so cleared of stupidly petty abuses, he even created the right atmosphere for Salamat's lessons, and for Karim to be in the right frame to walk him to the end of the street when he could really stay back no longer.

As they turned, their eyes fell on Fateh at the hookah where they had left him. Pleasantries exchanged, before Sanjay got into his bicycle, a word was bound to be said about the old man. "He's a noble soul!"

"That he is. You can't imagine how handsome he was! It's the deaths that've shattered his world! But tell me—truly, do spirits of the dead," Karim could not help questioning Sanjay, "really stalk the part of the earth they lived on? That's the impression Fateh gives me when he talks as if his daughter's still hovering around the courtyard. He sometimes seems to

hear even her footsteps. And that can batter believers and disbelievers. Both. Believe me." "Psychic reality!" And quite unthinkingly, Sanjay moved in the direction of the ruins. Karim, as unthinkingly, tagged along. "Doesn't what you're writing about also relate to the world of spirits?"

"M^aning thereby?"

"That whatever world's been conjured up by the imaginative mind, becomes in the course of time, itself a world of realism all its creator's own. Could you really see all you jibber-jabbered over in your illness?"

"If a man concentrates with his entire being, not only can he see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears, but also smell with his own nose... all the shapes and forms conjured up, I assure you."

"Then do Heaven and Hell really exist?"

"Undoubtedly! When Shirin, for instance, plants a sapling in your courtyard, when Barkatay and Nehmatay cook and serve you with pleasure—your home becomes a Heaven for you. When, on the other hand, they suspect each other of foul play and build up explosive situations, the same place is converted into...."

"...a blazing Hell! What I mean is something else...."

"I wrote about it last night." Sanjay leaned his bicycle against a boulder and sat down on a seat-like rock. "Meeta on her seven-hued rainbow is a figment of my imagination... a trick of my fancy... an illusion. What else?"

"No one's ever come back to this world. How then has man conceived metaphysical philosophies? Some profess to have communion with departed souls." Karim too found a seat for himself.

"Some in India and China have spoken of marriages with souls. And if someone one really wished to spend one's life with a dear departed," Sanjay glimmered a smile at him, "wouldn't a madness afflict the sufferer with—er, what you might call, an indefinable malady?"

"It sure should. But whether the separation's during life-time or after death, what beats me hollow is how souls can inter-marry. Despite the vision and glimpses one has asleep or awake...." Karim breathed heavily. "Nehmatay's expecting."

"I know."

"I dreamt last night," he bent his head bashfully, and waited, as it were, for his voice to lean fully on the throat for support.

Sanjay softly put his hand on his friend's back. A deep sigh lifted the weight a little. "After all Lord alone knows how many years, I had a glimpse of Mumtaz. What a time in life to be having such dreams! Madness, isn't it?'

"Why?'

"She lay breathing her last. What could be the purpose of such a vision?"

"Did she say anything?"

"That's precisely what I was going to tell you. She looked at me only one with a word of consolation. 'Why are you so sad now that I'm coming to your house?' "

"How would you interpret it?"

Karim shrugged his shoulders.

"I can tell what's in your mind."

"...that wherever she is, she's alive...."

"...or that if she isn't,... she'll be born in your house. Nehmatay's expecting."

Childlike, Karim rested his head on his friend's knees. "That's precisely what's been buzzing inside me since morning."

"Now do you understand why man thought of reincarnation as a way out?"

"Out of what?"

"Of the separative-factor. Through Rebirth."

"The man who thought up 'reincarnation' must've been like me. Don't we always find ways out of our predicaments? You Hindus can draw up a vast genealogical-tree of Avatars. A regular lineage."

"To perpetuate their noble deeds—I suppose. How could Valmiki have carved out his image of perfection had he not written the *Ramayana*? After that fantastic exercise what does he end up by saying? That Rama was an Avatar of Vishnu! Then comes one with a treatise on another image of perfection and ends up on Mahatma Buddha as an Avatar of Rama! Similarly the image of a perfect woman is wrought on and on in chain-process: Vishnu's consort Lakshmi becomes Rama's Sita, and in Krishna's time, Rukmani. Likewise, the concept of

perfection varies. When, for instance, the acme is physical strength, there is the story of an island. When the mightly Atlantic fell is not known. The might of the island-race remains unparalleled in history! But the spirit, they say, is regenerated through Stalin and Hitler."

Sanjay was still going on when Karim clipped him short. "Do you mean to say that you discount my dreams—in toto?"

"Nothing of the sort. Man's, mind demarcates no frontiers. If on none else, it can work wonders on itself. Take my case. Whatever I kept muttering and stuttering in my delirious state, was certainly no revelation of Divine Grace or Truth. The only irrefutable iota of truth was that Meeta was no more. So, in consonance with what I'd heard and read—I left this world in search of her. The magical powers of Life had not worked; I set out to try those of Death."

* * *

One morning, Karim stood all ready and set for the word 'Go' when he noticed that no 'print orders' had been given on the final proofs. And so he waited, in the place assigned to him.

Rather hard it was. He had not been feeling too bright. A touch of fever he had had just the day before. With bones aching and all, he had dragged his steps to the boss to tell him he might not be able to make it in the morning.

"No—Mian!" He had pounced on him. 'Take the day off later, if you must. Not tomorrow. We've to honour our commitments to two parties: Embassies really. We have to get the bundles of pamphlets sent dead on time."

And so Karim had swallowed a couple of aspirins and turned up. To what great end? What was the big idea, thought he, if the best part of the day was to be idled away? And no rest either. The boss was taking his own sweet time coming to office.

Karim measured his paces up to the manager's room. "Here was he giving orders right and left yesterday... the work was urgent, he impressed upon us. And here he goes leaving the 'orders' place blank. Here was I ready to finish it all by lunch-time! My problem now is how exactly do I begin?"

"Which is this embassy-order you're talking about?"

"How do I know? The simplest way out is—open the file and tell us how many copies must be printed."

"Yeah. Now that you mention it, a bell rings. I did see something—Just a minute. Let me check!" And he opened and shut file after file.

"Strange isn't it—for you to forget what you read."

"Not my fault." The forehead over the files puckered. "The pages aren't numbered; no index do I see—My predecessor has certainly left everything in one unholy mess. That's all I have to say at the moment. How the press is being run at all floors me!"

Karim maintained a discreet silence.

"Ah—here it is. Utter confusion as I said. Which letter in which file." The manager tapped the papers and rearranged them.

"You've found it."

"Yes—I've found it."

"What's the number of copies?"

The manager scrutinised the contents carefully. "Eighty thousand."

"Eighty thousand," Karim sniffed and snivelled. "Oughtn't you to be getting the paper fast from the wholesalers?"

The manager cut Karim with decisively more knowledgeable looks. "Embassies—you should know, my man—see to their own supplies. They take no chances over what we might supply—inferior in most cases as they are anyway. In this bickering-snickering country where no one has time to think of qualities...."

"I know that."

"How much have we in stock?"

"Ten reams."

"Ten reams?"

"The calculation's simple. Five hundred large sheets to each ream means we can print a thousand in one lot. Five thousand to each of the two cylinders. But you say the demand note's for eighty thousand. That is to say, we need one hundred and sixty reams. Please have whatever we have taken out."

"From where?"

"The godown. Where else? That's where stocks are kept."

"But their stock are with Hari Lal. I distinctly remember. I worked at the same firm before I changed over to here."

Karim stood with his mind ticking silently for a while. "He's no longer with them. He was turned out."

"Whatever for?" And then it clicked. "He must've struck it hot making some extra money, in the black-market."

"Massive stocks went. So we heard. He made a neat pile."

"And since then we've been their stockists, is it? But what did you ask for? One hundred and sixty reams? Some difference that—between one hundred and sixty and ten! No, sorry—I don't think I'll take the responsibility. Let the boss himself come."

"As you please." Karim walked across to the corner shop for a glass of tea. And when he saw the boss, returned and got down to the printing—as per instructions obtained. Just the ten reams!

At one-thirty that afternoon, Karim was washing his hands after lunch, when the new manager nearly passed him by with a smirk on his face. But since the subordinate did not respond, the latter assumed that he had not really caught on. "Mian," he came a step closer, "you've saved a good hundred and fifty reams today. Do you know that?"

"I do. So does the Lord God above."

"Had I listened to you and your calculations, both of us would have gone whizz!—Like the paper." No response still. "What would you have to say to that?"

"I am writing a book, *The Ideal Worker*, these days." And on that piece of information, Karim left, sprinkling the water off his wet hands.

At around four that afternoon, the boss sent for him. "How's your friend these days?"

"Who would you mean, Janab? Sanjay Sahib?"

"Exactly."

"Fine... thank you."

"Has he found something big to do?"

"Well, er, in a way, yes." That obviously made no impact. "He's living in his own world these days... writing a monumental novel," he expatiated.

"You call that work—do you?" The markedly irritative tone abruptly changed to equally unmistakable sarcasm. "Every

son of a—thinks himself a genius, imagines himself to be a Kalidasa! He'll bash his brains by landing nowhere. Tell him, to scale down from wherever he is. There's more money in checking proofs."

"I will."

"How soon will it be? We've to clear backlogs."

He rang a shrill bell for the peon's prompt entry. "Wasn't it 'C' Block? Safdarjang?"

"Yes, Sir."

He scribbled a note and handed it over with the specific instructions. "Now, don't you come back without Sanjay Babu. Understand! Say, it is urgent."

The spirit of urgency was injected further. He pinned more hope on Karim. "Have you any honest person in view who could help us out with the composing? One, I mean who'd not run away with the types. Should he knew very little, I'm sure we could train him within months."

"Let me see."

"Have you no son of your own?

"I do. He'll be turning fourteen."

"Then why don't you bind him apprentice for a year or so? What's he doing? Studying?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Only Urdu? Like you... or...."

"Also Hindi and Punjabi."

"Then what more are you waiting for? We'll put him into harness here."

Karim went to his machine-room. He had taken permission to leave a couple of hours early—after finishing the work in hand, of course—but marked his time. It was well worth waiting. The peon had been sent to his friend with a message.

Sanjay sauntered in at around half-past five. To his brief 'hello' Karim came up with his burning desire. "What about a drink? We'll buy a bottle on the way."

"No need to. I have some rum lying around."

They went off together in silence. On reaching, Sanjay poured some liquor in two glasses while Karim took on from an earlier day's tete-a-tete "So it's one up, you say you are, on Bule Shah! You've reached a stage, my dear friend, where it

was impossible for the great mystic poet to reach. Do you know that?"

Sanjay chewed the cud on a couple of sips and a couple of puffs from the cigarette he had lit. "So it's several stages beyond Bule Shah you are, are you?"

"Sure... sure! All his spirits kept surging up to was with the deadening urge:

'To go and seek and find
A country of the blind...'

"He failed, my dear friend, where I succeeded." And he shook off his tensions with pretentious laughter. And he recounted the latest story of the five thousand pamphlet's printed against eighty thousand. "Now tell me when the order's this, and they print that, and nobody can see anything untoward anywhere along the line—I could speak for the whole country—but let me not cross my limits... is it not habitat of the blind we're at?"

"What conclusion do you draw?" Sanjay could not have had a more dead-pan expression on his face.

"Simple arithmetic. So much paper saved; twenty times more charged for the so many thousands not printed."

"There you're wrong. Your master's wise; those entrusting work to him, are twenty times wiser."

"Well—I never...."

"Don't tell me they can't see the difference between five thousand and eighty!"

"If they can—then?' Karim could not complete the sentence because he could not get at the secret catch somewhere that surely was there.

"My dear naive friend, they all arrive at a consensus before they launch on any thing gigantic like this!"

"You mean to say—they also know...."

"Absolutely everything!"

"If they're party to the unwritten agreement, they draw the cheque for so much printing and so much paper from their government and go halves."

"Much worse. It's downright dangerous... outrageous—the way governments set governments out to graze."

"I'm probably a dimwit—but I'm damned if I get you."

"Changing the metaphor—does a government need money to topple another government or does it not?"

"That's foregone conclusion, isn't it?"

"So for the first thing you need the first type of money; for the second, the second. Whatever amount's saved from the first forms the hard core of the parallel economy these types run to that of a government's."

"Our master's in the know—that means?"

"How else can he so coolly slash down the printing orders?"

"This is absolutely revolting! Enemies from within!"

"Why do you think the country's in shambles?"

"We're ourselves to blame, aren't we?"

"If others were to consider ours theirs by adoption—there'd be no casue for any quarrel. They take money from foreign powers to break their own."

"Why do we not pay them back—right and proper—in the same coin? Can we not see through their bally game?"

Sanjay smiled knowledgeably. "You had a good view of the same people when as Messenger of Death you took me on a round of Hell. The sole difference between them then and now is that there they were easily recognisable since they were unmasked."

Karim quaffed the contents of his glass to the last dregs. "Then it's simply a case of striking our heads against walls only to wound them. Nothing else comes of the likes of us blowing our tops off."

Sanjay offered to fill the glasses again. But Karim was resolute. "I really couldn't take more in my feverish condition. And there's a good five-mile-cycling-stretch ahead of me yet."

Getting up to go, "Oh yes—I really forgot," he changed the topic to immediate interests, "how far would you say has Salamat reached? I'd be having to begin him on something by way of a livelihood from tomorrow."

"Good for me. He can stop here on his way back home and save on my time. He can read only printed or typed pages yet. What I mean is," Sanjay went on to explain, "he still finds it difficult to decipher manuscripts. But if he's bound down to a job he'll certainly get more practice, and with practice he'll certainly reach perfection quicker."

"Why I particularly ask is the boss asked for him...."

That initiative by the superior was, by Karim, an honour.

"Good. He could then break the journey back home for lessons. He'd be saving on my special trips for him."

"So that excuse for coming home will not arise anymore." Karim was caustic.

"But I'll be seeing you. Daily. That's the idea surely. He'd be on the carrier of your bicycle only. You wouldn't drop him and come back again for him—would you? You don't have another, for his independent use, have you?"

"You're not taking on yourself the additional drudgery of proof-reading, are you?" Karim had cooled down enough to show consideration and concern for his friend.

"But this drudgery is being paid for." Sanjay was in a lighter mood again. "I have so many of my first drafts to see to. Writing on clean sheets is so much more exciting. To transfer the rough into a neat final draft takes so much more effort."

"Are you getting down to the proofs right away?"

"Tomorrow. My eyes can't stand the strain in this failing light."

"Then let's go home for a bite together."

Sanjay was in two minds for a few moments but soon decided. "Okay. Do let's."

Karim bought a quart of liver on the way. "I'll cook it myself. You'll be licking your fingers off when the dish is finished. Find me a hotel that can compete with me."

And so directly they reached, he took his seat on the low wooden stool by the fire and Sanjay his on the cot by Salamat's side.

The pupil was quick to pick up speed in reading with impeccable enunciation. Writing was however a bit of a problem. Correcting the recurring errors, the master thought it fit to give him some incentive. "Learn fast. Do you know you have to write the whole of my novel out in fair? That is, I've decided, going to be your first major task. Tell me in my ear—do you feel up to it?"

Shirin was helping with the dinner. Overhearing Salamat being pumped up, she edged in a lump of dough in hand. "Wouldn't you give me a try? I'd love to transcribe it. If I may."

"You?" Sanjay could not get over his astonishment at this offer.

"First you ask me to keep it a secret! And here you go and blurt it all out yourself!" Salamat grumbled. Sanjay looked from the one to the other—stupefied.

"I know she knows more than I do." The grumble soon watered down to a whine in self-exoneration. "But then she's bigger than me. Isn't she?" And since Sanjay still looked puzzled the boy elaborated, "She doesn't take lessons from you—yet the whole day she's at them—She ties me down too. I have to keep teaching what you've taught me. She's finished the whole book!"

Sanjay smiled benignly. "What was there to hiding things from me? Anyway, now tell me which book is it you've been at?"

Shirin tried brushing away her blushes with her arm and went back to the tedium of preparing dinner. "The same." Salamat was determined to be out on her. "The one you've written. She sneaked the copy out of Abba's cupboard. That's it. See it for yourself..."

* * *

Lost to all the world in the act of transcribing the rough draft into as fair script as ever seen, Shirin sat exalted to a state of eternity—if ever there was such a state—that is, until the sun stood staring at her from the threshold of her room. She quizzed a little over a squiggle or a scrawl scored out, scribbled over or squeezed in a much smaller hand—but soon overcame these initial hurdles. She got so used to Sanjay's writing that at a pinch, she found herself dotting the i's and crossing the t's with ease. Intently she bent over the sheets after until she had the eerie feeling that some lines had been lifted off the written page and inscribed on her fingers!

Further movement impeded, pen and ink shifted away—lost in thought—with unseeing eyes, she shoved the papers on to the cot and went to the cupboard. Coolly and calmly, her hands moved as if nothing was new or strange withing their range: until they fumbled their way to a small mirror that lay on one shelf. Her eyes alighted on her own face with a sudden awareness of her radiantly youthful charm.

No one in the family had such large black eyes, nor indeed, such a pale complexion. So pale had she always been even when small, that should Nehmatay eating something, she would thrust a bit of whatever it was on to her palm with the words: "Yours eyes'll bob out o' their sockets if you're not fed. Go on, pop it in your mouth!"

Her cheeks had not since filled out, but she certainly was hungry-looking no more. And when her black curly eyelashes like little fringed curtains were matched to distinct advantage by the black veil she occasionally wore, she always made it a point to check on the ensemble in the mirror.

The climactic difference in consulting the mirror today was observable in that she had neither worn her black veil nor had she any eyes for her own eyes. They were fixed on her forehead—for that part of her face shone as it never had shone before.

Was there some sort of magic in the words on her fingers? She softly touched her forehead with one and, lo and behold! A round red auspicious mark stood absolutely in the middle of it. She clearly saw the reflection in the mirror. And a clearly peach-blossom complexioned face was there for her to gaze ravishingly into: a face she never had seen before.

She was still trying to figure out what exactly it was that made it look as it did to her when Jamila's voice with "I can't find my sandals..." penetrated her Island of Tranquillity. "Can I wear yours? I've only to run across to the corner shop for Amma's betel-leaf."

Shirin quickly put the mirror back in the cupboard and hid her face behind the door to rub the telltale red mark stealthily. Jamila grew suspicious. She peered over her sister's shoulder. "Whatever are you thrusting your head into the cupboard for?"

Shirin rubbed the spot harder. "Nothing. I smeared the ink on my fingers into my forehead... I was looking for something to wipe it off with."

"Let me see." Jamila ran her eyes up and down. "There's nothing at all." And slipping her feet into the sandals she had come searching for, dashed out of the room and house in a flash.

Still somewhat dazed, Shirin once again examined herself in the looking-glass before she rechecked the papers, pen and ink that she had kept on the cot.

All the tools of her trade were intact and on the cot where she had kept them. But a binding spell seemed to have been cast on her. All she had put heart and soul into, came surging up word for word, flooding her mind. From the 'rainbow' scene onwards, she became an integral part of the theme in more than a mere figurative way. She ascended the azure regions to touch the colours of the rainbow. On discovering that the paints were wet, she dabbed a spot of the red on her middle-finger and putting the auspicious dot on Meeta's forehead, carried the same over onto her own! On rethinking, she felt that the spell had not been cast on her or on anyone else—but on itself! The charm had been woven into the inscription on the paper. That was why it was binding her.

A fountain of tears began flowing from her eyes. She did not know how and whom to go about asking why her heart and soul were being drawn in by herself only.

Putting away her papers, she lay down to give the impression that she was totally fagged out. Actually night-reflections were on full steam. When Karim came home, Barkatay lost not a moment jumping to her own conclusions. "Go and see for yourself," she spurred him on, the "girl's burning. Take her temperature."

Shirin lay in what appeared to be a deep sleep. Karim tip-toed up to her. Quietly he felt her forehead, took her pulse, examined the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet and consoled his consort. "Relax. The fever's not too high. Cover her with a blanket. She'll sweat it out by morning." And when leaving the room, he tenderly placed his hand on her forehead again. "Wouldn't you like to drink something? A sip of tea?"

"Water, please." Shirin responded to her father's solicitations, but immediately sprang a totally unrelated question upon him. "Abba, only Hindu women wear red marks on their foreheads, don't they?"

"Yes my child, but..." his voice shook from fear, "you've been dreaming, have you?"

"No!" Shirin was as clear-headed as ever for a clear reply. 'It was a point I'd noted from the novel."

The thaw had set in iced-aching-joints when nimbus clouds cast a vast moist canopy overhead. And in the early evening hours—twilight glided in from the courtyard, through

the open window, and settled comfortably on Shirin's bed. The loose unfinished leaves of Sanjay's novel silently sat on the stool near by. When exactly she had lain down to get the stiffness out of her back, would have been conjectural—but words from the foregoing pages began sprouting up before her.

A piece of nimbus appeared to have broken off to be anchored on to her brow. From the cold and damp, she snuggled up and at an uncertain moment, her laved hand swept up to mop the cloud from her brow.

But it had perhaps already escaped from her loosely plaited hair to a solitary curl that stood out on her forehead. In brushing this aside, she set free the cloud as well to roam freely in God's good stratosphere: for it to float away to become a fluff-like cirrus patch steadily to go on losing in volume as it receded into the distance and to end up in a faintly spiralling column of smoke.

And in watching it fade away, Shirin became progressively shallower and shorter of breath as if the sourrounding air had run out of its oxygen content and she lay in a state of semi-consciousness. Equally probably, her eyelids—heavy from lack of sleep and from fatigue—had finally shut and put her into deep sleep. In due course, the dark vastnesses of her dream got striped with various colours. She sighed with relief, breathing became normal and she stretched herself. And then the colours became jazzier and moved closer: so close in virtual fact, that she could stretch her hand out and feel their varying intensities and densities with the sensitive tips of her fingers. That she further had actually leaned on to them was when she sensed a breath of warmth in the air sending a tingling sensation through her. From the touch she could tell that not all stripes were painted. The one, for instance that had slipped out of her grip was a tough, although silken twine. She glanced again at the rest. Some had drifted horizontally, others overhead—neither group within her grasp. Yet she tried times without number. And oh dear! In that frantic bid, she went and sprained her ankle! And with an excruciating spasm of pain, up she sprang from her sleep!—Whom to see standing at the foot of her bed and shaking her up? Her mother. "And is this time to sleep? And in winter? Inviting trouble you are. You'll be stiff as a ramrod if you're not careful."

Shirin looked around bewilderingly. She noticed the rough rug that had been over her so considerately. Advice was still on, "If you were so worn out and could not help having a snooze, the least you should have done was to get yourself something warmer. You'd shrunk from cold before I put this over you." And too busy to stand on longer, she volleyed a few more functional words on her way out: "Get up! Nehmatay's not too well. You have to look sharp kneading the dough while I trot across for potatoes. Peas have been shelled."

Shirin flung off the rug and would have swung into action almost at once had her eyes not fallen on the papers. When could she have left working at them and dozed off into dreamland? Blankly she stared at one, and then at another, until it all came back. Ah yes, she was at the rainbow-hued swing on which Sanjay had seen Meeta. And she recalled the rainbow-hued stripes she had been trying with all her might to reach out to.

The cold draught coming in at the open window sent a shiver through her. His Meeta sat astride the swing-seat, I dare say—'Why did I have to strain myself at getting it?' And she recalled also how she had touched and discovered the twine of hard yet finely-woven-silken texture. And she sought out an explanation from her memory tank. 'Jamila and I had improvised a swing on the branches of a tree. And we'd go—the two of us—high and low... when we were little girls.' No. That did not work. Her mind was restless. Just possible Meeta pulled the twine up. She was at the other end. Shirin put the pending work away and got down to her kitchen chores. Her hands shook. She felt all hooked up inside.

It being Sunday, Sanjay was on his way to Karim's when, passing by Fateh's door, he casually turned his head for the usual salutation. Seeing him neither in the corridor to the courtyard itself, he went straight in and—lo and behold! Who should be coming from the opposite side but the two elders themselves! "Look who's here! My Izzat Beg! My most-worthy-of-respect, young friend!"

Sanjay countered Fateh's rather effusive praise with a rapid staccato. "And where pray are you bouncing off to with Karim Lala?" Fateh invited both to his house and dusted the cot standing against the wall before he explained the nature of their joint mission. "Nehmatay is not too well today?"

"That's some memory you have!" Karim laughed. "No. Not quite yet... she has some days to go really, but Nehmatay's foot slipped a little so we hopped along for the midwife. Just in case."

Fateh bustled around getting the hookah ready for Karim. Lighting the tobacco with a couple of live-coals from the wood-fire in the grate of his neighbour's kitchen, he tuned to Sanjay. "And what hospitality can I offer you, my good man? Permit me to serve you a glass of tea."

"What greater service can be expected my friend than elevating Sanjay Mian to the rank of Izzat Beg?" And with an admiring eye on the wheel, Sanjay fixed a date with him. "Whenever you're next turning out pots, I'd be glued down to you and to the way you'd churning those slender-necked pitchers: 'Surrahies' really."

"That'll not be too long a wait now. Winter's a dull season. There's been no market for even the cups and jars turned out. All collecting dust. Have not had to bake them in the kiln. There's the pile stashed away."

"But did you handpaint them?" Sanjay's aesthetics cut through the elder's realistic meanderings.

Fateh waived the idea as obviously superfluous in the circumstances. "Should you need any," he conceded up to a point, "it'd be a pleasure to set my hand at whatever pattern you flatter me in choosing." He could not have been more gracious. "What's holding you back? It'll be my pleasure." He urged Sanjay to make up his mind.

Sanjay got up with a forced smile—more suggestive of pain. "In the most scanty rainfall areas of the world where they see rain once a blue moon...." the philosophic mood had caught on to him, "age is determined in terms of the rain in the period of one's lifetime: so-and-so, five; so-and-so, seven; so-and-so, twelve.... and so on. Should we not have for our own measuring-rod whoever be the object of our love?"

Fateh and Karim looked pretty lost in such quirks and oddities. "Say—for instance, our Karim Mian, Mumtaz; Fateh Mian, Salma; I, Meeta."

Karim inhaled long and intensely at his pipe before he nodded. The point made had sunk in. "You're right. The determinant factor is: when precisely does life come to a stand-still for whoever... when souls do get stuck."

Then, as if to wrench the trio away from the anguish consuming their respective beings, Sanjay switched back to superficialities. "Righto then, whenever I come this way next, I'll sit by your side and see to the floral decor on cups myself."

Fateh's sense of the skilful craftsman's pride was hurt. He could have been curt in his reaction, had Karim not held him back with another profound deliberation strained through his subsequent thoughts. "What about exceptions like you? Aren't their creations their loves? Shouldn't their lives be measured against so many novels.... so many canvasses?"

Sanjay sniped as one at the ready. "Then you've four models already to your credit. A fifth's on the way."

Karim blinked. "I... I'm not a sculptor... which model? I was speaking generally."

Sanjay sparkled jovially. "Shirin's one, Jamila's two, Salamat's three, Dula's four. Haven't they done their parents proud? One so different from the other."

"I'd cry halt there, my dear friend!" Karim got over his flatness. "There's no place for images and idols in our religion," he effervesced.

Sanjay gave a hearty slap on his back. "So you've thought up the image 'n idol' thing? Isn't that ingenious of you?" The twinkle in his eye got brighter. "How come you hadn't thought of it when Mumtaz was mentioned?"

Karim's face fell. "I could banter with an ordinary man. But who could with a god? I tell you these writers are no less than gods on earth. Look at the impunity with which they abrogate to themselves the powers to make or mar the fates of their characters!"

Sanjay heartily enjoyed listening to what was being said. Fateh felt uncomfortable. He did not like the idea of all the gibber-gabber going on without something to eat or drink. "If you don't mind sharing a morsel with us on religious grounds, I'll go to Pir Bux's shop in the next street. He makes the best kababs and chappatis."

"On religious grounds?" Sanjay simply repeated the dubious words to underline the effect.

"I know very well of course," Fateh corrected himself, "that you're as a member of Karim's family, yet I thought no harm asking."

"Another time, thanks, I've had eggs and tea. I really shouldn't take anything more."

"Since when have you had no inhibitions—eating and drinking at theirs, I mean?"

"Good Heavens!" Sanjay ejaculated. "Do I remember?"

"You're an exception. I've never heard—let alone seen a Hindu hobnobbing with us Muslims. But you're a learned man. Tell me now, had the Brahmin-Shudra, upper-and-lower caste-distinction always been there? Who could first have thought it up? And when precisely in the history of the country?"

"I'll answer that one—Fatehea!" Karim was as one newly-inspired. "How could one man have been treated differently from another from the beginning? Just as faces differ, so must they have found variations in I.Qs. Those who could exercise their minds: who were better than others in reading and writing—must obviously have been the ones to be classified as Brahmins; those who proved better warriors must as obviously have become Kshatriyas; and so those who stood out in business and trade. Am I not right?" Karim was stating historical truth and submitting himself as well to correction.

"They got grouped as Vaishyas," Sanjay completed the sentences approvingly.

"Class-distinctions really must have begun with the Shudras: that is to say, with those who were fit for nothing more than fetching and carrying. And so all castes must have been put on the 'capability'-anvil."

"No, Mian! This is a much later phenomenon." Sanjay lit another cigarette. "The one-and-the-same man begins at the lowest rung of ladder: the Shudra, and then through Vaishya and Kshatriya does he graduate to the Brahmin."

"We don't quite get you!" The two older men found this trend in Sanjay's conversation quite beyond their powers of comprehension.

"Simple. The first premise is: each newborn is a Shudra."

Karim came down hammer and tongs. "Too sweeping a statement for me. How can both low and high castes be born in the same family? Impossible!"

"Not at all," Sanjay propounded his clear-cut analysis. "An infant naturally has to obey to do as he's told. After this

Shudra stage, he learns the 3 R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. So he becomes a Vaishya. When in adulthood, he fights for his country, how can you not call him a Kshatriya? And finally when he knows all that is to be known about life, why must you not rate him as high as a Brahmin?"

"Never heard all that before," Karim pensively pulled long at his pipe, "although what he's telling's really making sense."

"Actually, that's how it must've begun. I'm clear in my mind," Sanjay could not have been more emphatic. "That's how life has shown us down the centuries. But you know how it is, once a story gets distorted, twists go on being given to it."

Karim adored Sanjay most in such moments of profound wisdom. "Let's go home," he put the hookah aside and rose.

"But the midwife?" Sanjay was in two minds.

"She was massaging and pressing her body when I left. Ages back. She must long have gone."

That resolved the conflict. Both took leave of Fateh and proceeded on their way.

* * *

One fine day, Karim was hanging the washing on the line when Sanjay arrived. He stood his bicycle against the door and remarked amusedly, "This looks like Karim's house, said I to myself.... How come, a naked fakir is in here?"

Barring a loin-cloth, the man virtually had not a stitch on. "A fakir too has a heart somewhere," he bantered "It turned out to be an unexpected holiday, so I thought, I might as well lend the women a hand."

As Karim was taking a little longer at squeezing, shaking, and hanging each piece, Sanjay bent and fetched a cot from the little room they were stacked in during the day. "You, my friend, ought to have been among the learned elite."

"You're perfectly right, I wish I'd stuck to the dreams of my youth and spent my lifetime fulfilling them. Like Bule Shah, I should have been a fakir. Unencumbered, I should, like him, have nurtured my passion—wandering where my fancy led me and gone on composing verses and music to suit my voice." But Karim swung back to the present reality mighty fast. "How come you thought today of what I should have been?"

"Because of your precious style of speech—when you're in a mood, that is. Everyone for sure has heard of the King's Treasuries—alas, no one has of the fakir's. You alone can coin and compile a 'Fakirology'. But..." Sanjay too descended into the immediate present. "What's this holiday in aid of? Least expecting you to be home, I thought I'd zip forth and back with whatever number of pages I could grab from my amanuensis...." His attention was diverted at this point by the batting and thumping of the massive pile Barkatay and Jamila were washing between them at the handpump.

"Be done with the bat now, Amma!" The daughter wanted to speed up the process of washing. "If we carry on with all this noise, not one word of 'royalties' and 'treasuries' will reach our ears! The two are going to be at a 'feast' now!"

Sanjay shot a quick glance at her to let her know that he had heard her. Karim however was too in-drawn. "Some Saint's Day from the vast Hindu Pantheon." He explained the nature of the holiday and his own programme. "I had some work to do. I thught I'd peep in at yours... and earn my bread later."

"What about some tea for us, Jamila Jan?" Sanjay effectionately tweaked the ears of the listener on that pretext. "We'll let you in on 'royalities' and 'treasuries', okay?" That was enough to send her packing. Directly, he got down to his tete-a-tete. "Things'll work out—I think. That's why I came for whatever part of the manuscript's been transcribed."

"Have you hit on something?"

"Not in my own language. But I suppose I could try striking a deal on its publication in English. I happened to be speaking of it last evening. Hearing a gist of the plot one offered to transcreate it. There's an off-chance of its going to the press some place abroad." Sanjay stopped short noticing his attentive confident's brow creasing on increasingly.

"The devil they did, did they? I tell you, our own people ought to be grilled in Hell."

"It's God's business to grill them in Hell... or wherever—not yours or mine. We have enough on our hands as it is, to cope with in our all too, brief lifespans. Do we have a single second to spare, tell me..." Sanjay was as earnest as he was honest in his down-to-earth approach to the prevailing state of

affairs. "Where's Shirin? I've got to check fast on the progress she's made."

Noting the urgency in Sanjay's voice, Karim darted off across to his daughter's room but, as swiftly darted back. "See for yourself!" His eyes glittered. 'You ought to take a snap of her buried under a sheaf of papers. Until well after midnight I saw the light in her room. She kept working all through, I swear. Now she's fast asleep."

"All my fault!" Sanjay gallantly took the blame on himself. "God alone knows with what effort I pulled myself out. And here I go now squashing her under the same weight!"

Jamila came along with a glass of tea in each of her hands. Sanjay helped himself to one—but changed his mind and handed his promptly back. "Go—give it to Shirin. She most likely hasn't had a sip since morning."

"Oh no! Of course not. There's no one around here to think of her, poor dear, but you!" Jamila was stinging. "Talk of partiality! Did you ask whether I'd had a sip?"

"Silly girl! He must've thought that she'd worked all night and must've fallen asleep tired and hungry." Karim put up a stout defence for the elder daughter without offending the younger one in the act of returning the glass to Sanjay. "This is for you," she assured him, "I made some for her before she fell asleep." But ruffled up the next moment as a typical unpredictable teenager in a moment of mortification. "You taught her to read and write. Why not me?"

"When did I have anything to do with teaching her?" Sanjay sought hard to appease the jealous one. "She learnt all she did entirely on her own! You know that better than I do." More on the subject was put an end to by Barkatay's calling out: "Hey you-girlie, set the lentils on the boil. And put the spiced, dry lentil balls in too for extra tang. I'll see to the seasoning after the wash."

Jamila's absorption in her fresh assignment left the two friends free to resume their discussion. "I've not been able to take my mind off what you said the other day." Karim bent his head over the hot glass he held in both his hands.

"What was that?"

"About Brahmins and Shudras... and about everyman's life's pilgrimage through all the four castes."

"Well there's pure truth percolated by whoever first worked the equational solution out."

"And so whoever he was, the point is that he earned his way up to Brahmin."

"Or to 'Alam-Fazal'—ship—as you all call both the enlightened and the learned."

"And the one at the other extreme remained stagnating at Shudraship!"

"For generations! And so with the other two castes. Some to be cast to the humblest calling. But enlightenment or learning, I'm convinced, has no relationship with the age of any man."

"Have you heard of Hafiz Sahib?"

"Who hasn't? The good man passed away only the other day."

"Exactly! May his soul rest in peace. Went about beating drums in praise of the government so long as he was alive. And honours in return were heaped on to him."

"Yeah... I read the obituary in the papers."

"Did you know him?"

"My bad luck. Never had the pleasure. All I ever came to know of him was from those in the forefront of his funeral and burial rites."

Sanjay bemusedly asked, "Tongues kept wagging even at that solemn hour... eh?"

"That's the way the world goes. Doesn't it? As chance would have it, the day before yesterday I too fell into their company."

"And how was that?"

"Actually all they'd sought my assistance in was to find a good proof-reader in Urdu—a language with an extremely limited number of readers: with numbers having been steadily on the decline. I mean, since the Partition of the country in 1947. Those who did not then opt for Pakistan—chose to branch out in other lines."

"Are you then their chosen one these days?"

"Highly-skilled craftsmanship is needed. The artistic usage of each word's what gives the distinct stamp. Not many, I assure you, can pass that test. So they asked me to seek out one. I thought of going down town—Pir Dutta would well have

fitted the bill, only one hasn't heard of him of late. The Lord God on High knows whether he's among the living or dead. I'd have been only too happy to help a fellow-artisan on."

Karim heaved a deep sigh. "I still have that picture before my mind's eye. They were thinking of a commemorative volume on Hafiz Sahib as they at the same time kept telling each other anecdotes about him that are too profane to a delicate ear." Some papers specialise in obituaries. Such things happen everywhere... complete with dates and bundles of photographs and eloquent praise they...."

"That they should have printed a photograph of the sandals or slippers he last wore was perfectly ridiculous! Wasn't it?"

"Who bothers about those pathfinders who wear the soles of their feet out in their arduous journeys?"

Karim lowered his voice. "What all conclusions will they arrive at on what all they write! As unbearable to the delicate ear'll be the truths they suppress. The hypocrites! What hollow praises! What feigned bout of applause!" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "And the stories that went round! He'd spare neither sister nor daugher! Could he really be trusted with any woman? No, Mian, not even with that slip of a girl who'd been left to his care—and only for the few days until she got the seat promised in the hostel when her father flew abroad. Who dared help when the girl cried out?"

"Help! Lord!" Sanjay's voice grew as taut as the veins veed on his forehead.

Karim seized his head in both his hands in disgusting despair. The Educational Society, they say, started a journal some years back and elected him Chief Editor. All in all was he actually of the press they'd set up. And what do you think he did? Within a year, he sold off everything, pocketed the sale proceeds, burnt up the account books."

"Is he being sued in court?"

"Whoever else suffered for the packs of white lies, let me tell you, brother, it certainly wasn't him! He'd swallowed his advances from the government according to the terms of contract." Karim scoffed and scowled as he related the sordid story. "And to crown it all, the government had to buy ten thousand copies of the trash he'd written in the book

published. Three cheers for the skulls and hulks that comprise such governments!"

"Isn't that how taxes go up? Gosh! Abominably!" Sanjay decisively concluded. Both were sick of thinking up things like these. Wisely, Karim turned to themselves, "Did you include that fiendish scene of flesh being chopped up from live bodies? Ghoulish! However could you have done it?"

"Where, my dear friend, would the nerve-centre of the novel have been without it? Do you suppose I'd have written it at all if?"

"Brilliant! Those without brains... with halters around necks. lazybones.. dead-weights. Ha! Ha! Exempted from taxes! What next!"

"Point counterpoint: Those who use their brains, who earn what they eat, who eat to enrich the blood in their arteries—those are the ones whose flesh must be cut."

"Weird!" Karim got heated up. "Then folks like you in other countries should be raising their voices in protest. But, brother." Sanjay was as cool and calm as could be, "Governments have tongues—not ears. That's how it is everywhere in this world."

"I could tell you more!" Karim was roused to greater passion. "Whatever's being done about the book is another matter—sorry, I can't help reverting—they issued an appeal to the government for a stamp in Hafiz Sahib's honour! Can you beat that!"

Sanjay burst out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, "Have they laid on a hot line to Hell? Have they established a channel of communication with him?"

Karim joined in. And with the uproar, Shirin woke up. Settling her veil on her head and shoulders, she modestly entered upon their hilarious close-up in the courtyard.

Sanjay rose up and greeted her. "You're doing marvellously, I must say!" Karim transferred his newly-acquired knowledge on to her in his supremely delightful mood. "You've already graduated from the Shudra to the Brahmanic state, my girl! See how Sanjay has begun salaaming you!"

"I'm leaning rather heavily on her. One must respect a co-worker."

"Do you know..." Karim confronted her, "you are still an amanuensis!" The novel's going to be transcreated for publication in English."

Shirin shot one fleeting glance at Sanjay and then looked down. "Go and get the pages done. You're keeping him waiting for too long, my girl!"

She promptly went in and within a minute was in the doorway with the sheaf of papers in her hands. "Shouldn't you carefully go through these just once? Just in case, I mean. I've made a mistake somewhere."

Right at the beginning only had she shown the first page or two. He had instructed her on the width of the margin, the number of words to a page—and left her at that. The question of approving or disapproving had not since arisen.

"You've written as neatly and clearly as a novice at a maiden effort!" Sanjay was all praise as he sat calculating on the number of sheets in hand. "One hundred and twenty! Hey! that's tremendous!"

"It took me time picking up speed," Shirin thought otherwise. "It'll be much quicker now that I have...." she measured herself accurately.

Sanjay wanted to thank her: to tell her how truly obliged he was, but, gave up. Words commensurate with the labour of love just could not be found. "You're the first one to go through the novel. Tell me honestly what you think of it," he instead sought her opinion in all earnestness.

From the way in which her large, black eyes focused their stare at Sanjay's face, it was evident that the answer was certainly not half as simple as the question was. Alternatively, did he imagine seeing them dialated as with tears? Or was there a sort of an unqualified, indefinable complaint in them?

Complaint? What for? Whatever over? Unable to perceive what precisely she was hankering after or brooding on, Sanjay silently strode out with the precious output in his arms.

* * *

Like cells in a battery, there was space just for the two beds that were there in every room. Identical too were the window and door to each—opening in a row onto the courtyard. Lack of

cross-ventilation made the rooms stifingly hot in summer, heavily humid during the rainy season that followed, and dismally dark and cold in winter. The only saving grace was that due to the number, Barkatay and Nehmatay did not have to share; if Salamat slept in Karim's room, it was not because they had none to spare for him but because he still felt sort of scary all by himself; Dula, of course, was yet too small to be weaned away from his mother's care and caresses.

One night, barring Shirin's, there was no light in any room. All was blissfully still until Salamat got up for a drink of water and Karim's sleep was momentarily broken. The boy examined his pocket and crept into Shirin's room. He tried to catch her attention, but she was far too absorbed in her work to notice his presence. Jamila was rumbling and grumbling away outrageously. "You'll never turn off the light and I'll never be able to sleep. Why do I have to get stuck with you, I can't understand. It's impossible sharing this room with you any longer. I'm forcefully going to occupy Salamat's first thing in the morning. I'll invade. I'll raid. Time I had a nook to myself. All my own."

Shirin raised her head from her work—probably to pacify Jamila when she noticed a form crouching at the door."Who's there?" She was a little disturbed although she curbed any such feeling temperamentally. "Oh, it's you! What are you doing here?" She wondered why he should be awake and be away from his cot.

"Nothing. I was a little thirsty."

"Go back to sleep then—if you've had water—that is...." And she began to work out the remainder—mentally calculating on the time to be taken for the completion of the job in hand. Soon she was at it again. She had finished two more pages when her attention diverted again... this time by a muffled sound from the courtyard.

"Who's there?" She certainly was alarmed by such an intrusion upon the silence of the hour. It was too dark for her to see anything outside. Salamat padded up to her, finger on lips, eyes darting in all directions as swiftly as swift could be.

"What are you at?" She was irked by his uncalled for moves. He signed to her with his hand. She turned to where he was drawing her attention. "Where's it now? It was right here just a few minutes back."

Salamat took a scrap of paper from his pocket and handed it to her, "Jamal asked me to deliver it to you when no one was around."

"Who's Jamal?" Shirin looked at the paper just given and then at Salamat for some kind of explanation.

"The huckster in the next street. The fellow with a pushcart."

Karim's voice overpowered Salamat's at this juncture, "Who's in the courtyard?"

"Only me!" The boy squeaked: "I was thirsty," and bounded back to his father's room.

"What for mercy's sake is tickling you at this hour of the night?" Karim's sleep being broken again brought a note of harsh irritation to his voice—heavy with sleep.

All was quiet again when Shirin's hand trembled with the crumpled-up bit of paper that had just been thrust into it. She did not know yet what the contents were but the type of smell that came from it made her feel that she was getting stuck in the slime and mire of some slum. Striding out, she could have raised her hand, she would have brought it down hard to smack him pandering... acting go-between.... She felt like calling out aloud to her father to tell him what pranks his son was being caught up in. And a fear seized her. Everyone asleep would wake up... even the quiet street.

Then violently shaking from that fear, she came back to her room and sat on the edge of her bed. She detested the hand that still held the messy dirty scrap and made it fling it away. It fell on the papers she was working on. And a horrible feeling overcame her: as if it was a message for her straight from Hell. As to what it was, was by her not worth bothering about—she was ironically at the chapter anyway—what the effect of it on her was, could not be ignored. An icy blow seemed to have smitten her and turned her glacially cold. She had never set her eyes on him nor known anything more about him than that he was commonly rated as one utterly disreputble.

Her next irrespressible reaction was to tear it to bits and throw it over the courtyard wall. On second thoughts, she resisted that temptation. Facing reality necessitated handing it over to Abba the first thing in the morning. He should know how to deal with the impudent fellow firmly—and once and for

all, lest Salamat be made a tool of the ends... possibly be led to the to most scandalous sort of blackmail.

To think of resuming her task was impossible. She put her head on her pillow and lay down her limp and lifeless body. She did not know when she finally fell asleep. All she knew was that all the noises and sounds of the house had woken up long before her. What she rose up to was the glass of tea Jamila held out to her.

Frenziedly, she looked at Jamila, at the loaded stool and putting two and two hazily together, entreated her: "Go and send Abba in a moment!"

The stool alone was what she had eyes on when Karim came in.

"Is it all over?" He admired the pile of papers and patted her head. "You must've been at it the whole night through." And picking up the glass Jamila had left, held it almost at her lips. "A little hot tea does wonders, my child. Go to sleep after it. It's Sunday. Sooner or later, Sanjay's bound to come. He'll be elated!"

Karim was unusually long-winded. Shirin had to interrupt him heart-breakingly. "There's three pages more." She drew his attention to the untidy piece—absolutely out of place where it was.

Karim scowled over it as he straightened the crease and crumple out as he read it through."What's this?"

"How would I know? I haven't read it."

Karim deciphered the crooked lines aloud:

'Tyrannic Shirin—let your wet eyes
The thirst of my burning-hot lips slake.
Your Mad Lover.'

As if the hand that held the slip of paper had been stung with a snake enclosed, Karim swung round. "Who brought it?"

"Salamat!"

"Salamat!" It was incredulous. Karim ran his eyes over the lines again and more minutely at the squiggles in the corner. "You say Salamat brought it. When did he?"

"Last night."

A bell rang in Karim's mind. Twice over had he been disturbed in his sleep. Twice over had the boy said he was thirsty.

Before he turned to leave, Karim made sure of the facts. "You say this was the first time Salamat served that scoundrel's ends?"

"The very first."

And clenching that reply in his fist, Karim charged out, breathing fire. And in the courtyard he looked at Jamila calling out to Salamat, at Barkatay kneading the dough in the kitchen, at Nehmatay's shut door, and at Salamat being called out to for a bucket of water from the handpump.. He grabbed the youngster by the crook of his arm and dragging him in, banged his room door shut.

When cries for help broke through the door shut hard, Barkatay sprang out. "What's happening? What's he done before he's really woken up, my girl? He was here by your side just now, wasn't he?"

"I don't know." Jamila decided to attend to the chore herself when hearing the heart-rending cries. She casually washed her hands at the pump and stood indeterminately. Salamat's cries grew louder and then was heard a loud thud, as if he had bumped his head against the wall or something hard.

Nehmatay stumbled with effort in her doorway, and taking in the scene, called in a still frail voice, "Will you stop bashing him up? You don't mean to kill him, do you?"

Barkatay hammered at the door with her messy fists. Karim responded neither by movement nor by voice but when Salamat's cries turned into choking sobs, he undid the latch. "What are you all standing in a row for? Is this a tamasha? Get on with what you're supposed to do."

Nehmatay frowned upon him for such a summary disposal of everybody, but banged her door shut and lay down; Jamila timidly took the bucket to the kitchen and got lost inside; Barkatay complained of Shirin's complete indifference—then concluding that she must be in the know, rolled off to her. "You seem to be his confidante. What's this fiendish breaking bones over?"

Shirin too bitterly wept on and on... with her face buried in her pillow. Any answer from her was ruled out. Yet since Barkatay squatted and pestered her, she raised her tear-stained face. "Get Abba to tell you—He knows best. And he will."

After that, no one had the courage to ask Karim. Only when Nehmatay refused to eat, did he take the tray in himself to her. "You should be having a double share," he taunted, "your son's begun earning! Five rupees." On noticing her pursed up lips, he drew out, "You're not going to ask what's he done?" And answering her silence, scornfully remarked, "He's struck a bargain! To sell his sister for Rs.5! Great businessman he'll be."

"What are you getting heated up over me for?" Nehmatay archly questioned. "He's as much my son as he's yours, isn't he?"

"As gold needs smelting and molten leads needed for form, so we must lick him into shape and save him from hell-hounds. Before it's too late."

And rising, he tried to made amends. "Get Jamila to feed him. He'll listen to her. Send her in with the tray."

* * *

Shirin revved herself up into action again. Negotiating the last bend was tough in the circumstances, but she geared the little energy she had into it so as to make it a very special Sunday... a Sunday unlike any other in living memory—but try as she might, she could not get over the feeling that an 'evil eye' had fallen over her 'sacred task'. Her mind got bogged by a host of things and in her throat stuck Salamat's wails and cries. So tears kept filling her eyes and words sank and swam in them.

Yet there was a magic web woven round Sunday. As the sun got higher and higher in the sky, she packed more and more spirit in heart and hand. And when the last line had been written, suddenly it grew as dark as the darkness of evening after the twilight hour.

Jamila persuaded her to eat a few morsels, Karim felt her forehead, and took her pulse. She had a slight temperature, that was certain—but nothing much to worry heads off. For a while she sat up and paginated the two files neatly. So, polishing her work to perfection, she covered herself up with a thick hand-woven sheet as if like a dormouse she was to waken up only with new winds of change.

Sanjay seemed to have taken his own sweet time in coming: at really the fag-end of the day. Tired of waiting, Karim was pretty squeamish greeting him. "It's more sensible—like striking friendship with the sun and the moon—at least you can tell when exactly they'll rise and set! "How can you be half as sure of a fellow human being?"

Sanjay leaned his bicycle against the courtyard-wall and came and sat by Karim's side. "There you're wrong my friend! The moon takes a night off after each cycle. Answer me now, has your friend ever given you the slip on any Sunday?"

"Come, come!" Karim was in good humour again. "You'll tell me next that the sun too is at the mercy of clouds."

"That may very well be! Only man must not be at the mercy of the missing and the lost!—One hopes!"

Karim cut him short. "Okay, okay.... Philosopher Sahib! More of your bon-mots in good time? Do you know you've been marked 'absent'?"

"Almost at the nick of time I learnt about a smashing Czech film, I just couldn't resist the temptation. Had I known earlier, do you think I'd have gone without you?"

"Was it really super?"

"The feature film was. But the documentary it was that took the cake—if you ask me. It was on a folk-medley called 'Cap-dance'."

"Then there possibly was no language-barrier."

"I really missed you. The nebulous quality about it was that you laughed as you saw the performance, but when you sat back to think as indeed I do now, the sequence really tugs at your heart-strings!"

"Then it really must've been 'A' class."

"There's real originality for you! The slick tricks by which the cap of one of the dancers keeps disappearing and the way in which the one with the missing cap takes the one from off the head on his right—has deep political overtones...."

"And so this goes on—I understand—until the circle comes round full!" Karim's eyes glittered from imagining the performance vividly.

"Come to think of it, isn't it the deadly truth?"

"Are you implying that's how the chain process for power rattles on? It's a wonderfully light touch given by the composer

of the folk-dance. If that's the art-form to a grim battle, the Czechs too, I dare say, have their Sanjay."

"That's what you say, my friend!" Sanjay paused a little before the solid statement. "You forget that there are finer and grander artists elsewhere than the one you're all out to lionise."

"Could well be, yet I refuse to underrate the monstrosity of your Hell-scene."

The glint that Sanjay brought back in his eyes was out again in a flash. "I've written it. It's marvellous. What haunts me now is, who's going to publish it?"

"The moment the English version's out, publishers will come wagging their tails after you. Just you wait and see."

"I'm not too sure of that! My sense of fulfilment can come only when I see it in the language I've written. Body and soul get mutilated somewhat in translation. I've seen the first few pages done. My conviction grows."

"By the way," Karim was in his element now, "Shirin's struggle's over."

Quite the most obvious reaction was to look towards Shirin's shut door, and then into Karim's face. "She's simply fantastic! How she'd learnt while Salamat was being taught, still floors me. And how she kills herself. The acme of perfection is what she's after."

"The poor child's not too well today!—Let me see if she is up."

Sanjay accompanied Karim to her room. Tenderly touching her forehead with his palm, he enquired, "Is it fever coming on?"

Shirin looked him full in the face and shook her head.

"You don't know how much of my time you've saved! I felt so free—believe me, that I went and wrote another story!"

She looked him full in the face again. "Hand it over then. I'll be your amanuenisis again."

"Aren't you exhausted?" Sanjay was jocular. "I should've thought you'd have heaved a sigh of relief: 'The darned stuff's over'!" But the laughter got stuck in his throat. Shirin was still trying to see through him as she did on that day—as if harbouring a grudge.

Sanjay left the room. But his feet dragged, as if he had slipped up on something. As for Shirin, sleep was impossible to come by. Nor could she get out of bed. She felt lifeless, saving perhaps the only spot that tingled with fresh life: the certain spot on her forehead that Sanjay had so tenderly touched.

* * *

A terribly dusty day it was. Whatever had been left over of the wind-swept heat of the sun, was being melted and washed down by the tears and fears of Nehmatay's labour-pains.

Afte the blowing over of the twilight hour, when the glow of electric and oil lamps began glimmering in both high and humble homes, the peculiar smell that the newborn carries was airborne from room to courtyard.

"Have mercy on us, O Lord!" was all that Karim had kept stuttering each time he heard the wail or cry. Only after the midwife had bathed and dried, wrapped and put the bundle in Karim's lap, was he able to whisper softly, "So—at long last! You've arrived—Taji?"

Considering the usual electrocuting reaction that the announcement of a girl causes, the poor lady mumbled the delivery as if she had had to take on herself the blame. But to the father, the entrance onto the stage of life was like hope fulfilled. In refulgent joy, he cuddled her in his arms and fondly looked into her screwed-up face. The light of the lamp was too dim. His feet led him involuntarily to the doorway. He searched the slate-grey-clouded sky for a reflection somwhere up there. None of Mumtaz's lines or lineaments appeared in any clear-cut form to match hers. Nothing at all to bear the slightest resemblance. Accepting defeat, he turned to the room. With the light falling on his back, the new arrival in his arms harmoniously merged into the darkness that brought out the substantial difference between the darkness of illusion and that of reality. The latter—whatever the intensity of its shade—was none the less a vibrant moving mass, no matter how frail and puny.

And when he raised his eyes above to the skies again, a slender shaft of moonlight wedged the clouds on both sides to sneak a peek at the earth below. And in the criss-cross

patterned light-and-shadow, Karim raised his precious treasure above his head for Holy Blessings.

And a prayer rose from his lips: no conventional prayer, something like cuneiform characters formed with the slight quiver of his lips as and how words got strung onto a strand of feeling.

Aside from Sanjay, not a soul had wind of what propulsive force could have been at the back of his mind to formulate the diminutive prayer, for Taji, the name instinctively had stuck to her. None, by any stretch of imagination, could have taken it to be a derivative of 'Mumtaz'. So, administering to Nehmatay the traditional postnatal cup of semolina pudding, sweetened with heatened molasses, Barkatay was dramatic with her information. "Open your ears wide! She's been named Taji already!"

"Fine!" Nehmatay was too weak to say much more. "We'll call her Sirtaj, the crown of our heads, when she comes of age!"

February was almost over. It should have been pretty warm, had there still not been a nip in the air. Karim put Taji back in the warmth of Nehmatay's bed. That was where the wee one snugly slept when Barkatay brought in little Dula. He insisted on sharing his excitement with the grown-ups by tickling her neck and cheeks and striking aquaintanceship with the sing-song: 'Taji-Maji's co-o-me... Taji-Maji's come....'

And a smile hovered round the little sleeping beauty's lips as if she was in the know of the secret between the two men: as if she was having her own secret share of unshared delight at their expense, and so was one up on them!

A week after the translation, the serialising of Sanjay's novel marked a turning-point. The contract was to pull him through the next three months. A deal had been finalised for it to be printed in hard cover, only the market position with regard to the sales did not look too bright. The prospect in fact was even bleaker for paperbacks than at any other time in the past. Whichever publisher the author approached demanded Rs.1000/- in advance as part-payment toward costs of publication. Their assurance that the amount would be refunded once the book came out of the press was all blah-blah. No one had ever heard of earnest money being returned. Therefore, Sanjay did not have the heart to part with the

manuscript crouching in the corner of his table-drawer. With time running out, it became the root-cause of a pain—slowly but surely—diffusing his being. With the further passage of time, he learnt to treat the drawer as sort of sealed. By accidental touch even, the fear haunted him. The words might begin oozing blood!

While the English version was being serialised, however, he received three letters in quick succession from foreign agencies volunteering to publish it in their respective languages. These overwhelmingly brought in tonic currents of cool air and worked things pretty well out. Or was his imagination running riot?

During one such insulating process that he was going through, Karim chanced to drop in. "You must've heard hundreds of swear-words and curses in your lifetime, Mian, there's yet one—I challenge, you haven't."

A greeting of this kind was bound to be baffling in its effect. And, in effect, Karim simply winked and blinked, far too baffled for words. All pent up, Sanjay was in no mood to observe such niceties as waiting for answers and sported on. "There's a tiny little spot in the world called 'Delusion'. When a man's boiling mad, he scalds the object of his wrath with—'May the deadly curse crust and crumble the insides of your head!... May you forget the name of even your sweet-love!' "

"Wah! Wah! Great! Here was a man with a heart somewhere to coin such currency!" Karim slapped his thighs and giggled.

"Such a curse must've befallen our language. One whose memory failed must've blown-up possibilities."

Karim caught on. "That's truly and wisely put! Come to think of it, good, love and respect are one and the same—if you ask me."

Although Karim could not spell from A to B, as a veritable aficionado, he not only went through each copy of the weekly in which Sanjay's novel was being serialised, but also made sure that the issue was in his possession. When the next number came to his hands that morning, he opened the relevant page and withdrew from the world outside, deeply into it. Sanjay sat marvelling at his rapt power of absorption until Karim himself broke the silence. "So it's been decided—hasn't it?"

That question, shot all of a sudden, swept Sanjay off his feet. "Wha-a-at?" he stammered.

"That we've to work off that spell."

"What spell? I... I... still don't get you."

"The idea'd sprung in my mind long back," Karim faltered a little. "Like green fruit I let it lie till it ripened. Time's up." He was not like one newly inspired. "We must get going. It's now or never, dammit! You've mastery over the pen. I, over the machine. For donkey's years have I been at it. What's holding us back, I ask you—man to man, from working off the spell by publishing on our own?"

Sanjay stared at Karim who had risen to messianic-heights in his eyes to acquire a prophetic voice for his ears.

"The boy's an adept at composing. He doesn't have to go around begging for work."

Sanjay saw both the way as well as the steps leading to that way. "That's all very well, my friend—But how can we risk it? You're the only earning member of a growing family."

"And when did I say that I'd tender my resignation? Aren't Sundays enough for a pushing-off start?"

Sanjay was still regurgitating over the project, when Karim persuasively piled on. "Do you think that that skinflint's begun paying him? My foot! Says—if you please, there's far too many mistakes he makes. Okay then, says I to myself, I'll set up a press right in our own house. Initial investment Rs.500. If he makes mistakes—you can set them right. That leaves paper."

"And what about the capital expenditure on the machine?"

"A small one from Amritsar would cost two thou... five hund... but who's bothering about that even just now? No great hurry. Until we've a fuller purse. We could carry our stuff to someone's press. Details could be worked out. No problem."

As if the pages had been woven by a web of moonbeams, Sanjay's mind shimmered with the gems of centuries' old treasures: each with a regal splendour all its own—but buried in centuries' old dust. Beaded-words on glistening-white pages of shelves and shelves of beautifully-bound books rose in his mind's eye. On other shelves sat similar treasures of other parts of the world. And so many unwritten works from his own brain sprouted out. And a journal with its individualistic

unrivalled in lay of its own quality and kind carried on traditions to modern times. He looked at Karim and then out of the widow at the sky in flames of royal crimson and gold: an artifact wrought by the setting-sun.

"Come on now," Karim's cudgelling him wafted him back into the room, "hand over the first sixteen pages."

"But mustn't we buy at least the types first?"

"Precisely. Therefore, my young man, am I demanding the first set of pages. How else will we know which letters are to be bought and in what quantity? That means we will not be losing any time on composing."

Sanjay's hand began to shake as only a hand in the throes of fresh creative activity can. He opened the table-drawer, gingerly took out the sheets, and along with these, passing on also a paltry sum of Rs.200 from the cupboard to 'Karim, he whiffed away one layer of pain. "We'll buy whatever we can now. What we can't—we shall, Inshallah! When I get the cheque for the next number...."

Karim took the script and shoved back the money to the nook it had been taken out from. "The first investment's going to be from me. As a gift on Taji's arrival!"

"Why not go the whole hog, so to say—and," Sanjay pressed Karim's shoulder affectionately, "name the Press after her, or rather, after Mumtaz? No, on second thoughts, we'll stick to the more endearing diminutive, Taj! *The Taj Press.* That's what it's going to be registered as."

* * *

Taking a half-day-leave, Karim went to the wholesale shop the following morning and purchased whatever quantity he could for the budget earmarked. Back home, he patted Salamat on the back. "Here's all this for you, my Hope-and-Promise! There's nothing that hands can't do if you learn to use them wisely and well. And here's this room solemnly being dedicated to work. Your offerings in putting in your best will be borne out by the blessed fruits harvested in due course."

Karim surveyed the cartons waiting to be unpacked in the courtyard and felt fresh blood coursing in his arteries. The cold black lead pieces had, it seemed, been heated up in his body.

And in his vacant eyes that never had shown any sign of dream or change, began surging up some shape of a new horizon to view. He placed his paternal hand on Salamat's head, "Go—touch the feet of both your mothers, seek their blessings, say a devout prayer to the Almighty on High and settle down to earnest, honest work!" And his eyes grew moist.

He recalled the time when as a boy of about the same age, he used to sing the old masters. Had he only recorded some of the lost melodies.... Ah, but the dream had, like the broken feather of a bird, been bruised and grounded. He had had neither guidance nor opportunity. Until he had given his injunctions to his son this morning, the past had been completely flattened out. What he might have been, had he? And his eyes grew moist.

Now he saw himself through Salamat. A dead dream seemed to be awakening through him: through his son who was now coming of age.

The day he had beaten him black and blue, Shirin had kept her lips sealed until she was able to tiptoe into his room. She had held his head to her cheek and cried and cried till her eyes were sore and till she could cry no more. Then she had tiptoed out and back in again with a glass of hot milk, and having got him to drink it, she had applied medicated oil to his aching bones after she had soothingly pressed them with her compassionate hands. Between them was a secret then kept of the crumpled up paper torn to bits and of the five-rupee-note he had gone and returned to Jamal. And the greater love and affection she had since showered on him; no one knew of either.

She knew what weakness he had for the highly-spiced salivating eats vendors tempt wayfarers with. He had gorged himself on fried fish and kababs! To the last paisa of the five-rupee-note had he finished on this mouth-watering stuff! But from that particular day, Shirin fed him—whenever she could—chapatties with plentiful butter and brown sugar. Barkatay had more than once observed Shirin's partiality and remarked. "The meat-pieces-and gravy-spoons have been counted and measured. Make sure he's not depriving others of their share!" Shirin made sure hers was his. On the sly, of course. And so he became her bonded slave of a sort and he

listened to her... and the fear of God was in him when he swore he would not go Jamal's way anymore.

When Karim had gone to work after lunch, she helped him unpack the ware in the 'Press-room'. And treating him to an even more generous helping of butter and brown sugar than before, she folded her hands. "Guru—you were to me when you secretly taught me to read and write. Keep being my Guru and as secretly teach me how to work the press!"

"You mean... you will compose?"

"Just you wait and see how fast I go once I begin! But don't you dare tell on me!"

"Not even to Abba?"

"No!"

"And to Brother Sanjay?"

"Certainly NOT!"

"A-ha! I have it!" Salamat was good at the guessing-game. "You left them open-mouthed once before; you're going to impress as a wonder-girl again! Isn't that it?"

Shirin blushed as she supressed a sigh. "No, Salamat. What would I be wanting to impress anyone for?" She thought deeply and continued gravely. "Teach me all you can teach me and as well as you can. When we're both bigger, we'll found a huge big press."

"We'll have to have machines."

"Sure!"

"Where?"

"Here only, where else?"

"We've no more room."

"What about mine?"

"Jamila'll kick up a shindy! She's your partner!"

"Why not give her half of yours? That'll leave mine to me entirely! We'll fix the machine in my room then. Then let who can, object."

"I'm not sharing. That's for sure!"

"Let's build one above ours."

"That's going to cost something. Who'll pay for it?"

"You and I. We'll only have to work harder to earn and save more."

"And who'll work the machine?"

"You and I. We'll get Abba to teach us when the time comes."

Salamat figured on another hurdle. "We'll need another hand."

'Whatever for?'

"We'll have to have a whole set of pigeon-holes: one for each letter of the alphabet."

"Go on."

"We'd be having to draw on the types till the pages have been composed and printed. Then the latter will have to be sorted out and put back again. 'Distributing' is really the word for it. It's time-consuming. We'll need."

"You and I should be enough."

"There's a lot more exciting work we could do than that deadeningly-leaden job."

"Don't you think Dula will have grown up for that by then?"

"Why doesn't Jamila make herself more useful? She's not the least interested in anything worthwhile."

"That's how she is. How can you and I help that?" And stopping the grey head on green shoulders from stumbling on more ifs and buts, she impatiently waived what was of no consequence at the moment. "Come, I'm ready! No time like the present. Begin me on step No.1." Salamat took the blocks he had set of Sanjay's novel when they had gone to the market. "See—I did all this in a hurry this morning. Then I had to jumble them all back for the weighing had to be done."

"That means we have to retypeset these?'

"Yes, we must be as careful as we can. Mistakes—'Printer's devils' they call them—can never be condoned."

"What happens if a mistake is made?"

"We-ell, to err is human. We all make mistakes."

"What's the way to set it right—I mean."

"See, we compose in mutliples of four—according to the four or eight folds of the paper and we run an inked ruler over. Mistakes can be stopped by the proof-reader. Corrections go into these margins."

"Then it's simple."

"Brother Sanjay can do the proof-reading. That's what he's been doing anyway." Salamat had used the floor for demonstration. With eyes on the written page, the hand mechanically went to the improvised pocket for each letter.

And Shirin looked on and on and took it all in with clear understanding. And she saw beyond Salamat and far above where the clouds seemed to have been parted—not by the moon but by Sanjay's face.

* * *

Sanjay was sitting at his table lost absolutely in the paper before him: his entire being reduced to a pair of eyes towed onto a moving hand.

When Karim climbed the stairs, when he entered his; room, when he sat—and tired of sitting, lay down on the divan—he had not the slightest notion of, until probably the visitor began smoking. Getting greater stimulus from the tobacco-smell, quite mechanically, he felt the packet on his left, fumbled for a box of matches and managed to extricate a cigarette but no matchstick since the box was empty. So with cigarette between the fingers of his left hand, he took up the pen again in his right. Karim then rose and understandingly held the flame at a convenient distance and as patiently waited for him to puff.

For a moment Sanjay looked comprehensively at the light, as if it had appeared by magic. It then dawned on him that the retreating form was none other's than his friend's and laughed. "Hail, brother! When did you alight from wherever?"

"That's immaterial. You tell me what fever's gripping you now?"

"I am just cutting paper."

"Oh, I see! Now that your Taj Press devours so much! But really—no joking. Are you at another story or have you begun a new novel?"

"Neither. Believe me. See for yourself. I was only ripping and ripping through milk-white paper."

Karim shot a quick glance at all that his gifted friend had furiously been scribbling away. "Hmm! All you do is: blacken milk white sheets.. Isn't that so?"

"Just the reverse." Sanjay smiled. "Mine's a kind of cottage-industry. I'm packing stuff in these sheets." Karim looked pretty dim. "You'd be running out of the stock, wouldn't you?" Karim looked as dim and dumb as before. "I am making

sure that you'll have a neat stack to lay your hands on. Say, how many reams?"

"If a novel runs into two hundred pages, shall we say, and a thousand copies are to be printed in the first lot, we'll require thirteen." Karim had by now caught the other's fervid fire.

"Ah! Now you're talking. It's just those thirteen I'm piling up for you; within about another fortnight, your thirteen reams should be at your disposal." Sanjay spent a moment more on the explanation still sought for, if Karim's furrowed-up forehead and set face were any indication, that is, "a contract's blown in for the translation of a book. Should I zoom on at the uniform speed of twenty pages a day? In fifteen days I'll have done three hundred. In other words, my dear friend, I'll have earned enough to purchase your thirteen reams. Get what I mean now?"

Karim lit another cigarette for intenser concentration. "Tell me, my young man, what manna and dew your dear mother was fed on to give birth to one like you?" He drew himself up to a cross-legged posture. Within seconds, he was in deep enough meditation to break out in the pure old-time melody that imprinted the couplet on the listener's mind:

'No other could have been born that morn:
On the morn that Sahiba was born....'

"One other, at least, was given birth to," Sanjay differed in all difference, "and that was to Karim."

"Come, come—let's both go and see the shape 'Taj Press' is taking!"

"Have you bought the types?'

"I'd taken the forenoon off for just that. Salamat must've seen to the organisational part. He should by now have composed 3-4 pages. I thought I'd take you along on my way back home. You'd like to see things for yourself, I'm sure."

"So Salamat's finally on his own, is he?'

"From this day on, by the Grace of God. Why does he have to work elsewhere anymore? He's his own master. I'm only looking forward to the day when I too will be free."

"We'll have you as our kingpin! Mind you, none else is competent to work the machine... until we buy one, Salamat's there as compositor, I'll run errands and see to other field work, but we'll still be having to hire one hand."

"No fears!" Karim drew as deeply on his cigarette as Sanjay did on his. "For one: you can't trust anyone these days! He'll be pocketing the types and we'll be having to keep running to the foundry or wholesaler in a constantly losing battle; for another, we can't be having strangers in the house."

In a wave of enthusiasm, Sanjay had completely forgotten that very important factor of the establishment. There was no great wall between the press and the domestic confines. The women and children would thus be having restrictions imposed on them. Sanjay therefore kept his lips sealed. He had not realised that they were not talking of Karim's home as it had been until it had been extended to include the 'earning plant'.

"If only Shirin and Jamila had been boys! I would've asked for nothing more." Karim was quick in rebutting his own wishful thought by his acceptance of everyone as they were. "But we've a long way to go until then. Why must we sit and mope on the distant future? Salamat's self-sufficient for now. A day might come, God willing, when we'll be in a position to convert the whole house into a press and build a whole floor above it for the family."

Sanjay's admiration for his friend's reserve strength increased; tinged though it was perhaps with a bit of envy too. He had hitherto thought highly of himself when he had undertaken to convert white paper into black mosaic with his more than inscriptive ability. By comparison, he felt infinitely smaller. "Come, let's make a move!" He began putting away his paper and other things for the rest of the day.

Rising from the reclining position Karim had subsided to, he sounded grandiose. "I had taken upon myself the challenge. I'll show them how I can do it. By God! I don't know how I'd endured it all. Had I not restrained myself—there'd've been such a fight... such a fight.. ribs'd've been broken... Necks would've been wrung."

"Where?"

"Where I work, where else?"

"Didn't the boss do anything?"

"Do? He didn't lift his little finger." Changing his tone to pleasanter thoughts, Karim did well to swing swiftly on to other men and matters. "The band that's to sing in the Hafiz

Sahib Anniversary Programme came today. Your name's a topper."

"My name? Mine? Are you sure? How in the same breath as Hafiz Sahib? And on his anniversary?"

"I'll tell you as we go along. On the way." Sanjay locked up the place. They both raced down the stairs.

On mounting their cycles, Karim resumed:

"Because of the serialisation of your novel, your name's on everyone's lips. So they approached me. 'He's your friend,' they said, 'tell him to write an article on Hafiz Sahib.' "

"So we're toppers as friends!"

Karim was far too worked up to take notice of the humorous insertion. "And the things they said about him! Ears stuffed with wax or stoppered with fingers might have prevented hearing."

"You told me that before."

"Did I? You'll never hear the last of it. A colourful character, they said, he was. Once they made him—what d'you call him who gives marks and passes or fails?"

"Examiner."

"That's it! And he specialised in raising the marks of the girls who went to him."

"I understand the rest of the crap. Why can't they keep their traps shut?"

"...and they have the cheek to ask me to ask Sanjay Sahib... if you please! Rank impudence, I call it! What should they know of poetic evaluations, I ask you?"

'I haven't even read him. Shouldn't the flingers and slingers of arrows and catapults flock together and croak his praises? Why pick on me?"

"I hadn't thought of that answer." Karim laughed till tears came to his eyes. "I wish I had. I still will. Only, mind you, it'll be as from me—else they'll simmer up and start pecking at you."

They had reached. Karim folded Salamat affectionately in his arms and without a word went to the little dark room in which their dream had begun glimmering into glorious shape.

Little did Sanjay know that Shirin was at that moment hard at pumicing and rubbing her hands clean. Inky stains

could have had a telltale effect. She shifted more to the other side of the bucket of water, where it was a shade darker.

* * *

Fateh usually preferred to do the austere cooking himself, but quite often he had to fall back on the only other option he had: Pir Datta's highly-spiced food. He would swear at the shopkeeper. 'The devil wring his scruffy neck... always on the scrounge he is... the devil scorch his throat for piling in all these chillies and not letting folks eat their money's worth." So he would cough and spit and swear till the blisters in his mouth subsided and cured. He would bake a couple of chapatties on the andirons—yet the 'never-never-again'... 'just-this-once'... seesawing even went on and on. Fateh had to eat to live and he had to chew the cud on what he could not eat and yet had to live. And so on one of the 'just-this-once' occasions, he dragged his steps home with the aluminium bowl of meat-curry and a couple of chapatties rolled in a piece of paper when he spotted Shirin in the street.

"At this time of the evening, daughter? Is it safe?" And he blessed her, moving nearer. "See you're grown up now. You mustn't take any chances. As high as my shoulders you are!"

"And what do you expect, Uncle? Me to be ever as high as your knees?"

Fateh was uncle to all: big; and small, to parents and grandparents, to children and children's children in the same house!

"You used to be just this size, no more than the span of my hand, when your mother often passed by with you astride her hips. Nehmatay's the spit image of you." He nearly slipped on a banana-peal when Shirin saved him from falling. She took his meal from his hands and reached his home. "Go in first." She insisted, "I'll put this in where you want it." She did not have the heart to tell him that his memory was failing him and that Barkatay was the one he meant.

The string cot was the only place on which he sat and ate and slept. On the cot therefore she set the humble fare and seeing an earthen pitcher in the corner, offered further assistance. "Shall I fill a glass of water too for you?"

"I'll take it, bless you. Just you listen to me. Had Salma been alive, she too would've been your height!"

She stood near the cot. Hearing the old man mention his daughter's name in a tone that touched the tender chords of her heart, she sat down for a while on the frame—silent and still.

"See... for me there's no difference between Salma and you—our Karim's daughter."

Shirin sensed that he was driving at something but was taking unduly long in coming to the point. So she waited.

"It's not wise for you to go out at all. Early or late. It's not safe. I'd have said as much to Salma. Karim would have."

Shirin showed him the little packet she had in the hand she held out. "Uncle! Don't think I went far. Just to that corner shop to get some betel-leaves for Small Amma. She has the habit. Abba hadn't yet returned; Salamat's been with him since morning; Jamila's been down with a splitting headache. So I said to myself—why don't I go? It's not too far."

"That's all very well, daughter, but you know how it is these days. Wolves prowl around by the pack. Our street scene is mercifully not all that bad. There're mangy litters in the next street. Pigs from gutters."

The Jamal-burr rankled, now that the street featured in Fateh's frame of reference. Not that there had been another attempt at getting to her since Salamat had returned the note torn apart, yet the incident put her on the scent. "Why, Uncle? What's happened? Where do they...!"

"Do you happen to know him? What's-his-name... a silly-billy name he has."

"Who exactly?"

"That street-vendor...."

Jamal had had a fruit-salad and spiced-gram-and-bun cubby-hole downtown for years now, but because he had launched on life as a street-vendor, as a street-vendor only they all knew him. "Ah yes! I remember! It's that Jamalu you mean, don't you? There's nothing wrong in the name as such if you ask me—but if a man goes to the bad, the poor name it is that gets soiled and sullied."

"He has his eye on you, daughter. That's why I don't like you to take any chances. How these hooligans would next bug you, who can tell?"

Shirin's expression got clouded. She rose to go. "Anything more, Uncle? So long."

"My Izzat Beg is one among millions." Shirin had no idea who exactly he meant. She sat down again, intrigued. "Who's Izzat Beg now, Uncle?"

"The same. He doesn't know. The one with a royal bearing. Karim's young friend—Who else?"

The clouded gloaming vanished from Shirin's face, giving place to a charmingly rosy-morning glow. "You call him Izzat Beg? And why by you, may I ask, does he deserve that distinctive respect and remarkable favour?"

"One day he asked me how I came to be named 'Fateh'. It should have been Tula—the potter. There was no sign of victory on my face. The Potter of the Sohni Chanson-de-Geste Fame I should have been, said he."

"Sohini's father...."

"Exactly! Since the day I saw him, I felt that the princely Izzat Beg had come to my door. Now if my Salma had been alive."

"Would you have offered...?" Shirin could not interrupt with these or any more words. Fateh drawled on. "Had she been alive.... But I never had luck on my side. I would have had Izzat Beg for...." And he struck his head with both hands.

Shirin felt a chilled current benumbing her. 'Had Salma been alive'.... The words that she could not bring herself to say, stood trembling at her lips. And a spasm of pain seized her. She shut her eyes, questions cropped up with the living. The Hindu-Muslim one, for instance, had relevance neither for Salma, nor for Meeta. There was no difference between the two dead—Uncle Fateh was for the time forgetting that side of the story that might have electrified communities.

Shirin dropped such emanations. The dark gave her the light for the recension, "And am I not as a daughter to you?" as she put her head against his. Like mushrooms from the humidity around, another crop of words proliferated—lest he felt hurt by such substitution. "Don't give way to such heart-rending despair, Uncle. Your hurt must be hurting Salma. Peace to departed souls, should be our prayer. My intention's...."

"Quite clear to me—Therefore have I always addressed you as 'daughter'—haven't I? And how wonderful it is to feel your presence! The walls that had closed in upon me like a grave are standing now to hold the roof above our heads. Don't you see?"

"I could come every day, Uncle, if you wish me to."

Fateh beamed with delight at the prospect. "Jamal's a stupid ass. But it's the neighbourhood too that's after him and filling his ears with stuff and nonsense," he confided all that had reached him by hearsay to her. "They say Karim's daughters don't go in purdah... that they have full freedom to laugh and talk to kaffirs... and... and Allah alone knows what else!"

"What do they know, Uncle, what all he knows! He's famous."

"Don't I know? But how can the ignorant see the Stars of knowledge glittering in his eyes?"

"He writes stories... and novels... His own, Uncle! And how much he reads—you've no idea." Shirin sat down again. They were on a common wavelength again.

"Right you are. Therefore must you come as often as you can. I see Salma through you—in you. Only make sure," Fateh suddenly remembered what he had really begun their confidences with, "make sure you don't stir out in the dark."

Shirin tightened her grasp on the betel-leaves and stepped out. "And when is it ever daytime in these streets? It's the dark of the evening really, but it could as well have been day." The pupils of her eyes dilated the regions of her mind with such thoughts.

* * *

More invigorating than the March days, was Karim's enthusiasm. From dawn onwards, he had lined everything up for whoever was in the chain. A good sixteen pages of type having been composed, his chant.

'O Friend, must they who Thy love win
Be having whole lifetimes to spin?'

woke the others up.

And each poked up his limited world to life: Barkatay set sweetened-spiced-rice on the boil; Salamat got ready in a new kurta-pyjama suit for his main milestone in life; Shirin rummaged in her cupboard for the fine hand-embroidered shirt she had inherited from her mother since she had grown outsize. And so forth. It was a very special day for everybody in the house.

Karim was to have taken half the number of typesets on the carrier of his cycle and Sanjay the other lot on his, soon after sunrise for the printing-press. Ah! he was already there. At the appointed time! Instead of the usual salutations, Karim went on smilingly with variations on the same couplet. He spoke, "I've often sung this—only now I wonder how a great mystic like Shah Hussain could have said this. Doesn't it sound somewhat odd to you?"

Sanjay knew exactly what Karim meant, but chose to keep quiet. He thought that the depth of his friend's interpretation ought to be drawn out. "Those who flail and card and spin should in fact be the ones to draw on love. Don't you think? Others make simply a mess of it."

"Isn't it rather the messed-up recesses that the poet is chortling over in the couplet? He was the perfectly right voice of his own times. Had he been alive in our day, he'd have had other inspirations and loves, I guess."

Shirin's entry at this stage ended the evaluation of Shah Hussain. Half-way through her perfunctory toilet, she had been netted in for the 'tea-service'. Winsome in her fine black embroidered shirt and silver earrings—although with unkempt hair still—she magnetised Sanjay as indeed she looked him full in the face as she had never before. And a current passed through her as he stammered and stuttered: "Karim Mian." Staring at her, he did not realise that his friend was tying the typesets firmly to the carriers, so not a single letter could be shaken out of place and at the same time was directing Salamat, "Just two letters of each. No more! Pack the extras separately lest we need replacements. Some could break at the time of printing." And even as he moved away, back to where he had earlier sat for his glass of tea, muttering: "I've stocked fourteen instead of thirteen reams. Thirteen would have left us tight after the first thousand copies. Why not have

eleven hundred? Printing costs would not rise. Why not... eh... why not?"

Shirin however observed that neither was hearing the other. Karim sat looking through Sanjay who sat with the glass of tea as it was, still in his hands.

Barkatay was calling out: "Don't be in too great a hurry. The rice grain needs to be left to soften in its steam just a little more. You must take something sweet before you go! It's auspicious."

Karim laughed, looking at the tea, "Like Shah Hussain you've forgotten to spin."

"Forget Shah Hussain and his spinning, my friend, look at Shirin this morining!"

"Come here, girl!" Karim promptly called out. Shirin, as quickly, turned as pale and cold as her silver-earrings.

Sanjay commented, "She's my concept of the illustration and title for the book-jacket. She looks as if she's already imprinted on the cover."

Shirin had frozen on the spot she stood. Just a few lines and curves were needed to make the imagined face and form.

"Then we'll get in touch with an artist."

Jamila chose to break in on that proposition with the two metal-plates of saffron-flavoured sweetened-rice.

* * *

On this particular afternoon, Shirin was like the sole proprietress of a firm. In virtual fact, the 'firm' was a little room with the compositor's table, pigeon-holes against the walls for the types, and the cupboard in the corner holding safely the entire format of Sanjay's novel within its formidable doors.

Through with her share of help with the cooking and cleaning for the day, as aforesaid, Shirin had closeted herself up for composing the next lot. Concentration all rivetted on the letters, she had no concept at the moment of what the finished edifice was to be like. By that, it certainly could not be concluded that she had erased from her mind all that she had transcribed with devotion and care—what really could have been meant was that she had the particular part in front of her

specifically in her mind's eye too. Sixteen pages over, it obviously was only the first phase she was at when the heavenly blue light merged with the imaginary one and mesmerised her. The spell cast over her had begun to permeate her very being.

To handle types automatically becomes a second habit with even a semi-skilled worker. It was not surprising therefore that Shirin worked her way intelligently by touch. Three pages were set thus in no time at all. Still, considering what she was taking upon her shoulders, the sun advancing in the skies above and the fatigue overcoming her, were some of the composite facts she was as fast learning to face as the shape that the novel was taking. Enigmatically at the same time, like the characters related to the novel that were subject to neither the laws of time nor of energy, she was a kindred spirit moving among and through them all.

During the next phase, however, when she was confronted with Meeta's soul, a current of electric-fire cut through her. How had that come about? She recalled the macabre story dissuading little children from going anywhere near trees after dark. The spirits and gnomes flitting about and scuttling through the foliage, the elders scared them, would flee their sylvan haunt and enter their bodies out of sheer ghoulish delight! Salamat's affliction came to her mind. He was a tiny tot then: calmly having his feed when he had suddenly burst out crying. How he had cried and cried, till he was blue all over. How they had had to run this way and that for cures and charms. Nothing had worked until in despair, Amma had ridden all the way to Lamme's Shrine. The saint-fakir there only could at long last exorcise the devilish spirit out of him. And what a relief it had been!

The Lord alone knows how such old, long-forgotten things that had not reared their heads up even when Shirin had been at the transcription-phase, were now becoming—by a delayed reaction of a sort—as traumatic as a nightmare... and featuring in this nightmare as an integral part was, of all, Meeta!

"But hers was a good witch!" It cost Shirin a good deal of time in reasoning out a conclusion based on all that she had heard. With the reflex action of a hand-wave she slighted it as

if it had a physical entity. On the contrary, lo and behold! It glided nearer!

Her whole body got stiff and numb. Slowly then, the alarming fear seized her: "Who knows, there must be some truth after all, in the pervasive power, they say, spirits have." And she tautened up each nerve and fibre of her body as if involved in a deadly combat.

In the new turn the novel was taking, Sanjay's hand was struggling hard to grasp Meeta's. Shirin groped for the requisite types. Instead of fingering them by the feel in the pigeon-hole, her entire hand came up against a solid wall! It naturally could move no farther. But in the frame of mind she was, it rather seemed to have been held in position—and indeed, stopped from advancing by an unseen Power. Jerked back into actuality, by the unexpected impact of the stone-hard wall, she grew alert to her silly spirit of rivalry, asserted thus. And thus she surfaced from the subconscious to the conscious state with the letter 'M' clenched tightly in her fist!

'I can't bring myself to typeset this!' The leaden-piece became, as it were, a dead weight—too hard and heavy for her to lift!

"She has no existence—yet she gets one. She'll live forever." And the leaden-piece she still held seemed to have the potency to poison her entire body.

A sun-ray poked its way through the old wooden window frame and fell on the compositor's table beneath: on really, the section she had completed, and the words she had head that morning rang in her ears: "She's my concept of the illustration. She looks as if she's already imprinted on the cover." The ray travelled up to her lips, "Meeta will forever and aye be a printed word, while I...." And she felt as if by the factor of illustration, she held the whole book together—clasped it, to be precise. And the firm and stern lips relaxed into a smile. Her eyes fell on her work.... she put the type in her hand where it should be, and she set another after it... and another. As if she had ultimately conceded to Sanjay's advances.

Sanjay, at that moment, hovered around the azure zone of his immeasurable imagination; while Shirin, like the earth, had the good sound sun to orbit around.

Salamat returned at noon, and after lunch, lay down for a nap. Karim and Sanjay came in much later. As the elder called out to Jamila for tea, the younger now made a straight bid for the 'Press'. Opening the door, he acclaimed: "Whatever the size of our venture tomorrow, Karim Mian, we're never going to forget our small beginnings here, I trust." And scanning with a quick, experienced eye the progress charted on the table, commented. "Who can hold the candle to you any more? Where are you, my young friend?"

Salamat woke up in the next room. Coming out into the courtyard, he gave his account. "Two letters only broke. Ask Abba—I lost no time replacing them, Bhai Jan!" He was still groggy from incomplete rest.

"Sure, sure! So Karim Mian told me on the way. What boggles me is how you got through this much more since—"

"Nothing at all." The boy dashed in to ascertain for himself what Sanjay meant as he still stood gazing at the galley. Salamat understood. Now that he saw what Sanjay had his eyes on still, he did not know what to say.

Karim had a couple of times observed that Shirin had taken time in washing her hands clean—ink stains do take long in coming off. If at all, that is. He quickly put two and two together. "Shall I, like a Rishi, exercise my super powers and tell?"

"And since when have you had super powers, Abba? Why don't you quietly enjoy your glass of tea?"

Shirin thought that her father would take the cue and drop a broad hint. Instead, he gabbered on, "Well—if I haven't anything super about me, one thing I certainly do know, and that is, to calculate by a love that admits of no laws." And he gripped Sanjay's shoulder. "The girl's one up on us again!"

"You.... You mean—SHE?" Sanjay noticed that Shirin was trying to evade scrutiny. Salamat grew serious. "Bhai Jan, I was under oath of secrecy. Now that you know it all, I can tell the exact truth. She began learning from that day itself. Even the first page was a joint effort. After that she's been entirely on her own."

Sanjay salaamed her. Raising the hand in salutation, he thought, must have been enough of a gesture that must have—from whenever the custom started—been all-embracing in

grace and dignity so that no need must have been felt of words....

Karim leaned forwards and patted his daughter on the back. "The Lord forgive me," he wiped the tears in his eyes with his knuckles, "for asking Him why I hadn't boys instead of you and Jamila!" And he heaved a deep sigh. "But how can this world find a place for such a daughter? It's too...."

Shirin pressed her head against her father's melting heart. "I have only one request to make, Abba."

"And what may that be? Speak up, daughter!"

"Get the machine."

"Machine—did you say?"

"Of the same type that you operate."

"A real printing-press, you mean?"

"Exactly! And—and please teach me how to operate it."

"You want to become a machineman?"

This was simply ridiculous! Karim burst out into uncontrollable laughter. "Barkatay! Come out and hear! Your daughter's aspiring to be me! Me at my job of machineman!"

But Barkatay needed no telling. She had watched her furtively learning to read and write and she had watched her at the typesetting labour-of-love. "Your daughter's a type by herself in this world. If you gift her a talent, you must gift her the wherewithal to use that talent!"

* * *

And so, as before, Sanjay went through the second set of galley-proofs; and as before, Shirin rectified all categories of errors marked by him. She did not need Salamat anymore for any sort of guidance. But as chance would have it, the second proofs had similarly barely been gotten over with, when Sanjay sensed an unusual tension in the atmosphere. On demand, when he was at the final proofs, Karim came and thrust two registers under his nose. "There you are! Satisfied? These were your requirements."

Sanjay thumbed through the slim cash-book and ledger bought for the maintenance of basic records at the very outset. "Here we go, then. Here we begin our holy beginnings!—God willing all will work out well!"

"Are you listening, Taji's Ma? It's you I'm asking the question." Karim boomed longer. "We'll put wee Taji's thumb-impression here on the first page."

Nehmatay ambled in response to Karim's call. "What objection could I have? Are you sure you've obtained Her Imperious Majesty's consent? She's been at it."

"Man can possibly reach the back of God's mind; to think he can a woman's, is a mirage!"

Sanjay wisely deferred any comments on Karim's ponderous statement since he had inferred the reasons for the tension he had of late been sensing. Karim left nothing to inferences however. "Ever since the girl suggested we buy our own machine, the behaviour of these two's been outrageous. It's a perfect hell they've made of the place! They'll not allow all that whirr-whirr-whirr from the second they stir out of their rooms each blessed morning to the end of every blessed day! It's nagging, nagging, nagging they've been at. They won't have the machine, they say. And that's that! A fat lot they know of the soup we're in. Till the wheat and corn come home, you don't ask people over, do you? So with us. Is the money from the machine going to grow on trees? Is it going to fall as rain from the heavens above? Where's it going to come from? I ask you. These two've been making my life miserable for nothing with the clip-clap, clip-clap, clip-clap of their tongues."

"I wouldn't blame them," Sanjay considered fairly objectively.

"You wouldn't?" Karim was still gruff—yet grudgingly was admitting to valid objections. "Actually they're having to put up with enough of the clatter-clatter of the two in here; a third would certainly be the limit!"

Nehmatay stuffed her mouth with a corner of her veil to stop herself from impolitely laughing to their faces. Barkatay contrastedly was militant in her backfire. "We're scissors going clip-clap and machines going clutter-clatter—are we? So... ho! Who's bothering how your tongues click and your brains slickly work? My advice is: Forget us and yourselves. Go and hear what the neighbourhood's saying and who all around are masterminding quick action."

Karim scowled at the two women. "The good God above has made everything. People have tongues and you cotton-wool to stuff your ears with. Whether we're in a position to install our machine in a year's time or two, you...."

On 'you', Karim got to boiling point and would have made things irremediably worse had Sanjay not intervened knowledgeably, "What are you wasting your breath on unnecessary arguments for? Don't you know, you can work only in a 'commercial zone'?"

For a fleeting moment, Karim was flummoxed. "That's so with newly-developing areas. That new law's not applicable to old localities like ours. I could show you." His mental clockwork was back in perfect form.

"Could've been installed before the Statute came into force. I'm not too sure now."

"That'll be looked into all in good time. We're only dreaming."

"We're not only dreaming," Sanjay focused vision back again to actuality from where it was threatening to shift in the heat of the moment, "I was just about looking forward to talking other things over with you. Remember the book I'd been at translating? Well, those people've said that they'll straightaway buy one-third of the lot we'll print on our own. They're foreigners. No great hassles... payments cash down. That'll mean three-fourths—if not the entire costs, met. Should fifty copies more be sold, the rest's net profit."

"The capital for the machine is right there then!" In excitement, Karim sat bolt upright on the cot he had lain disgruntedly.

"They'd asked how many I reckoned could be sold. Not more than six to seven hundred I imagined, but rounded the figure off to a thousand. More than all that, it's been mentally rewarding. The spirit of the insurgents in those Italian and Sicilian vineyards have really gone to the head! Translation-work can be killing."

"You're incomparable!" Karim gave him an adorable pat on the back. "Had my boss been there in your place, he would've blown up the figure to ten thousand! He would've printed the three thousand for them and pocketed a neat packet—without any further effort whatsoever."

"You can't do a thing of that sort in Taj Press!"

"That I know. But is what you're telling me really true?"

"They're waiting for me to sign the contract. The delay's from my side. I couldn't put my signature without consulting you."

"Then shall we explore the market for our machine?"

"I'd still advise caution. I shouldn't be in a tearing hurry."

"And why not?"

"A little discomfort now won't do us any great harm. Let's get on with the printing. We'll comb out a place for the press first, then for the machine. First things first! We must straighten out our expense account in this Register." Sanjay promptly called Jamila. "She'll bring Taji. Don't forget she's our mascot! We've got to have her thumb-impression!" He did not have to explain all this to Karim once they had talked things over. But business was business. He did not want to miss the auspicious little ceremony.

"People begin the other way round," Karim was in his elements now. "They get hold of the biggest crook going for the first touch! Then counterfeit-receipts follow in bundles! You know what happened only the other day? An innocent chap must've fallen into the boss's trap the first time. He'd got work done for sixty rupees, the receipts he was being made to sign was for two hundred! What a racket he created!"

"Who and who are you going to point your finger at? And where are you going to stop? Tell me."

"At Taj Press! Wait and see!" And he inked Taji's right thumb. Both the sisters stood silent witnesses until Shirin sprang an idea upon them.

"Uncle Fateh has all that courtyard of his going a-begging. His pots and wheel can remain in the corner. That still leaves us so much!"

"Are you still with us?" Sanjay was impressed. "How come I didn't think of that? One little room would do—the outer space can come in handy for packing, stacking packages, and soon...."

"That is, if he agrees." Sanjay weighted the pros. No cons. "And why shouldn't he? He's always short on cash. We'd pay some rent."

Karim stood up—ready to spring into action right away. "If he does, our problem's solved. We'll have to salaam Shirin again—don't forget." And he strode towards the door, linking Sanjay's arm in his. "Let's go back and ask him."

They were in the street when Shirin caught up with them. "May I come along too?"

"Certainly, Machine-operatorji. Most certainly! Lead the way—if you will!" Karim joked. Shirin was all seriousness. She literally bounded ahead and began knocking at the door.

"Is that my Izzat Beg?" Fateh put the cot out for Sanjay's reception. Shirin sprightly leapt up to him and called out in his ear. "Uncle! Abba's here too. Haven't you seen him?"

Fateh imitated his daughter in style and tone good-humouredly. "What have you announced? Who else has come?" And the four of them went into fits of laughter.

In all gravity then, Karim went into a detailed exposition of the proposition while Shirin observed that Fateh looked pathetically dim. After every few words from Karim to him kept falling like water off a duck's back, he kept punctuating: 'Which machine?'... 'How big?'... But appeared none the wiser. Unable to hold herself back, she intruded: "Just as big as that kiln in which you bake your pots. Just as your clay pots get baked, so what is written in the raw, gets sort of baked into book-form!"

"I see. I see!" Fateh's face lit up. "Then you'll be sitting here to bake your words? Is that so?"

Sanjay was astonished at such rapport so easily established. He tried to look at Shirin but his sight froze in his own eyes. Karim turned to Sanjay. "Here goes she swimmingly over our heads again! My hair's gone grey at the machine. I never could think of 'baked' or 'raw' as words in this context."

"A university professor of the profoundest learning couldn't have even," Sanjay humbly admitted.

The two stopped to listen in. Shirin was getting along fine. "Of course I'd be sitting right here, by your side, baking words every day. That's what Abba's been trying to get your permission for."

Fateh slapped her on the back. "Naughty girl! Did you have to bring Abba all the way here simply to put in a word for you? Have you forgotten you're my own daughter, Salma? Go

ahead, girl! Put whatever type of machine you wish to... wherever you like! The place is all yours."

* * *

When the three were on their way home, Sanjay sidled over to Shirin. "I suppose I'll be having to get busy at a new novel: 'Raw Words'."

Shirin's eyes met his, but were quickly drawn away. Something left with him, however, just could not be withdrawn.

Dark it was. All-pervading dark. The darkest hour before the dawn. Or was it nearer midnight? The bewitching hour? Or....

Pushing through the intense darkness at regular intervals, the voice of warning: 'On your guard!' clamped on and sealed a pair of unseen lips. As much a part of the dark, Sanjay lay on his divan. And as surely unseen a hand rose from somewhere telling him to be on his guard and as hastily it sealed the lips from where the voice pushed through.

He had the irrepressible urge to climb down the stairway, take a lantern in hand, rush on to the empty street, and aim a shot at the watchman: 'Have you ever seen the faces of the folks you've gotten into the habit of frightening with your warnings?'

But he did not budge from where he lay.

His hand rested on his heart. His fingers slowly and cautiously moved—scratched his chest to bring perhaps the same question again and again to his lips. 'Who precisely are you scared stiff of? Against whom should you be on your guard? And Why? Who?'

And he felt as if something first stirred within him, and then was being concealed. His breath grew strained and shorter—perhaps with the weight of whatever lay heavy deep inside him.

The watchman raised the same shrill cry.

Sanjay was on his guard. His fingers dug deeper into his chest and still deeper as if to wrest away the weight: as if to feel their way down to a question that the lips might have asked: 'Who are you afraid of that you've to be on your guard?

Of what? How can anyone risk coming in this pitch-black hour? And why? Where from?'

He felt something stirring deep inside him... to hide something. His breathing got strained—as if with the same weight he was having to bear.

The watchman pierced the blinding darkness again. 'On your guard!' He was wide awake. Even so something had wormed its way down into him: with whatever ulterior design: to conceal something safe and secure; conversely, to steal that 'something' kept safe and secure.

Absolutely worn out, he shut his eyes for some relief—but the next moment, consternated. Why should he be constrained to camouflage sleep? He really was awake to see what he needed to and to hear his lips purse up whispering Shirin's name in his ear. Those basic facts did not change even if he chose to ignore them.

Perhaps there was no question of choice. The sense of weight immensly intensified, he examined and pressed his shoulders and back as well as he could. At one point it seemed to have trembled at the touch—when it was flung off to dangle in the vacuum!

Spring was in the air. The branches of the neem-tree outside shook with the soft breezes and the leaves falling in from window and door carpeted the floor of his room. The dangling hand touched them as he turned over from one side to the other. 'Shirin!' He addressed her pulsating presence in the surrounding atmosphere as he swung his arm around her and grazed his palm against the embroidered floral motifs of her fine black kurta.

'On your guard!' The watchman's cry rent the pall of silence once more.

And Sanjay's fingers lingered tremblingly on the neem-leaves as if on embroidered floral motifs.

He could not account for the past two days. He had neither been to Karim's nor had he written a single word. The sight of pen and paper brought 'raw words' to mind. However facilely had Shirin coined the phrase on the spur of the moment, he could not get past it. It stood irrevocably in his ears like a judgement of destiny. He, therefore, knew in his heart of hearts that whenever in the immediate or distant future he got down to writing, in raw words would the deed have to be done.

Books would continue to be published even after Shirin had lived through her part on the world's stage: And in any given publication, Sanjay was getting increasingly convinced, a good many words, would have always to remain 'in the raw.'

The delay was squarely laid at the menfolk's door. It was for them to see the machine. The potter's place mutually agreed upon was again Shirin's brainwave. The clay and the kiln had already churned out something that was going to find a niche in the diction to be handed down to posterity since the apparently simple simile had a rich fund of condensed ideas packed in tightly. In the history of the language, Shirin, therefore, must earn immortality. Sanjay turned her words over and over in his mind. 'It's like your kiln, you bake the pots you churn out; the Press bakes what we've written rough and raw...' as he stared into the unfathomable emptiness around.

Earlier on, his eyes had grown moist in contemplating these basic differences in vivid meaningful speech. 'Silly Billy!' so he chastised himself. 'You have people educated enough to find more and more to write both on the cerulean skies up above and on the good brown earth down below. But how often have you come across someone who digs up an idiom like this?—Roots and all? Certain things can't be taught—let's face it. Either you have them in you... or you don't. And that's that!' And a fear seized him. Sooner or later, I'll get down to my writing again and my work will be published. Certain words'll always remain raw."

On his way to work in the morning, Karim dropped in to prod him into action. "Do go home to check the proofs. Work's held up. To what end? That sort of prodding could certainly not provide momentum."

It was broad daylight by now. No watchman was on his beat alerting folks in bed to be on their guard. In some corner of Sanjay's being, however, a vague sort of darkness lurked—naggingly asking him to be on his guard.

Before he went away for the day, the watchman always fetched the daily morning glass of tea from some place nearby. That propelled him into action. Standing in front of the mirror, he examined himself with his 'woken-up eyes'—abruptly turned, ran down the stairway, grabbed his cycle, and raced along.

As he turned into the lane, Fateh greeted him: "There you are, my Izzat Beg! At long last. I've been waiting. I had to bake my pots today. I sent a message for you at Karim's yesterday. Did you get it?"

"I didn't come yesterday." Sanjay propped his transport against the entrance wall. "And we don't have royal couriers, do we?" With a leap from corridor to courtyard, he frisked around eagerly. "Have you set them in?"

"...And taken them out! Long back. Since the small hours, my daughter's been my aide." That was when Sanjay saw Shirin busy arranging the ware neatly against the two walls holding the kiln in the right angle they made.

"And see!" Fateh held up cup after cup and mug after mug. "My child's made these exquisite patterns... hand-painted. Don't you like them?"

"What I'd like most would be to drink from each one of them!"

"Do let's then! Bring the best, daughter! Let's begin by having the first one purified!"

Sanjay's heart melted over the cordiality a certain culture could exude by such transferential phraseology. This one, to wit, of drinking from a cup. It surely would be scrubbed and washed to be rendered clear and pure for use again. What was suggested was the reverse.

And what affection was being showered on him by their vying with each other. Fateh displayed the one with more flowers in outstretched hand; Shirin held up another, with lyrical sprays. "This is better, don't you think?"

"Sure!" The spontaneity with which he gave in, completely negating himself, was touching.

"What you like best I like best." And that she filled with cool water from the earthen pot for him.

Sanjay took it and after a couple of sips sat admiring the delicate design. Then with a sudden jump, his transfixed gaze was on her. For a fleeting second, Shirin's eyes met his. Averting her gaze as abruptly, she asked, "Would you care for more?"

"Tut, tut—girl! And is that the way to serve him? Water—And nothing else? Set a little on the boil for tea". And he flurried in himself for this little token of love.

Sanjay sat silently admiring her. Shirin, for her part, felt a little uncomfortable under his fixed stare. Vaguely, she took another cup, filled it from the same earthen pot and offered, "Wouldn't you like some more?"

Sanjay's eyes shifted ever so little to rest on the cup already in hand. 'Meeta' was what she had ornately decorated it with. "This was what belonged to yesterday. Will you serve me a few sips in this delicately lyrical one for new beginnings tomorrow?"

* * *

When Sanjay came to correct the final proofs of the penultimate set, he sat by Karim's side and thrust the daily he was carrying in his lap. "Just look at this!"

Karim looked at the daily upside-down and downside-up just to humour his friend. "The girls have even learnt the Kafir's lingo. This parrot's proved to be too old to learn. Isn't that it? Why don't you tell me what has to be told?"

"About the novel that was being serialised."

"Shouldn't the last issue have come out?'

"That's why they've decided to join the race and print it in my language!"

"This is abominable! Absolutely third-rate paper. Foul printing. Blobs for headlines."

"Just as well you can judge by the looks of it, not the matter!"

"Have they too started serialising it?"

"Not the novel, Mian! The expletives. The subsequent issues will carry the matter over."

"The bastards! What are their stakes in ranging enemies for confrontion?" Karim could not help swearing.

"That's their dirty business! Why must you dirty your tongue? Let them."

"But what's their problem?"

"Morals! It must be banned, they say. Therefore the tirade. Therefore the organised campaign."

"The description of Hell! They allege I'm inciting people against the government! Under cover of the Hell-scene they adjudicate, I've really written a political satire."

"But aren't they right there?' Karim had his tongue in his cheek. "How'll they substantiate the entire act if they do not ban it? If they cannot materialise their vote-catching dream of Heaven, mustn't they match you on that of Hell? Perfect logic. They have no alternative."

Karim's outflow thus cohered with the smirk on his face. Sanjay was amused—yet positively worried. "I think we'd better postpone our project and watch the situation. Should they succeed in getting the book banned, we'd be driven against a wall, wouldn't we? Payments on instalment-basis would have to be honoured still, mind you. On top of it all, should you chuck up your job?" Shirin's dramatic entry left Sanjay's deliberations angling inconclusively in the air. She had overheard everything for her decisive assertion. "Don't you fret. Abba remains at his job. I'll operate our machine. What more is there?"

Karim was floundered by her astonishing determination. Sanjay sounded a note of caution, "You probably haven't heard all! There's every likelihood of the novel being banned!"

"So what? The world doesn't come to an end with the ban, does it?' Shirin meant business. Turning to her father, she drove on to a harder bargain. "Give me lessons on Sundays. I'll pick up fast. And there we'll show them!"

"If you're that keen," Karim laughed, "Shall I fix you up somewhere for machinemanship?" The tonal gravity in her voice that had never so far been heard by either of the men, stiffened them up to her rather demanding attention.

"I'm not available on hire! Please remember, however, should you install a machine, I wouldn't ever again—for the rest of my life—ask for anything else!"

Karim quietly withdrew into his shell. Sanjay on his part, roused to a challenging spirit. "Have you cared to calculate the losses entailed?"

"The cost of the paper."

"What about Salamat's labour and yours?"

"Cut him out. He's hardly interested!

"What about mine?"

"Your labours cease with the completion of the novel."

"Press-persecutors could curse and swear they couldn't dream of writing it."

Sanjay too withdrew into his shell. He had no answer either.

Shirin kept the papers for proof-reading on the cot, and promptly left. She had no time to waste.

"By the way, have you signed up the contract for the book you could well have translated by now?"

"I have."

"Let's then do another thing."

"And that is?"

"Print an anthology of our Sufi poets. That'll fulfil a desire I've cherished all my life."

"Why delay? Get down to the job. Find the finest verse and we'll see. One thing more...."

"And that is?"

"Let's postpone my novel."

"We'll do nothing of the kind! No! When other countries have undertaken publications in their languages!"

Sanjay sat down to the proofs. It was well after dark when he was through. "You were right," he complimented Karim on his intentions. "Unless we jump into the fray and gag the big-mouthed, how do we prove what our concept of Hell is?"

"Precisely. And aren't you subscribing also to establish that poets—I extend the group to include creative artists—are prophets?"

* * *

Spring was glorious. The seedlings and saplings that Shirin and Sanjay had planted some years ago around this very time, had begun budding and sprouting. With prodigality, the glistening tight-white jasmine buds and the pink, and deep red peach and pomegranate blossoms lent their superb blends to the subtly-scented atmosphere.

Life's skies however were dismally grey. From one corner the cloud of the ban still glowered, from another—yet another intensely darker, lowered over the heads of all.

Late in the evening Karim dropped a tactful hint to Shirin to meet him at Fateh's. "He wants you. Proceed, I'm following." Surprisingly, when she moved in the direction indicated, he slithered up by her side. "No—not to Fateh's, follow me!"

Leading her alongside the ancient street-wall he said, "A word with you—in private." Sitting down on a slab of rock, he motioned with his hand that she too make herself comfortable. "I'm certain—you'll never tell a lie." He broke ground. "Tell me truly, what's exactly on your mind?"

"What's happened, Abba? I've nothing. I...."

"Why are you obstinately sticking to your demand for the press?"

"Isn't it your dream as well? Didn't you want 'Taj Press'?"

"I'm not disputing the press-part. What I am is, your operating the machine."

"What's wrong with that? Can't women...?"

"Of course, they can. What I'm demanding out of you is why you said you'd never ask for anything all your life if you got the machine."

"I maintain what I said."

"You mean to say you'ld be working at machines all your life?"

"Not 'machines'—please, Abba! The Taj Press."

"But when you're married and gone, how'll you work at your Taj Press?"

"Abba!" Shirin was thoughtful. "You trust me that I speak the truth. Well in truth then, I don't have the slightest intention of marrying and going away."

Karim looked intently into his daughter's face: as intently, that is, as the minute-by-minute increasing darkness permitted him to. Then he took courage in both his hands to come to the purpose of his mission. "Do you know what Pir Mohammad said when he sent for me this morning?"

"What?"

"About your marriage only."

"But who approached him?"

It was Karim's turn now to be thinking up. "Of that later." It was as if he was wanting to gain time. "Just tell me why you don't want to get married."

Shirin's momentary silence was broken by her catch-me-if-you-can moves in circles. "Simple! Because I want to run the press!"

Karim placed his hand on her head. "My first condition was to get whatever's on your mind."

Shirin looked into his face and tried to remove his hand with hers. "That means you are wanting me to swear by you, doesn't it?"

Karim did not want to risk getting past her evasiveness. "Put it that way if you like!"

"If I make you to swear by me—not to ask that question—what then?"

Karim always had known that Shirin was far too mature for her years, but never so much till now. "When children grow into adults, parents treat them as adults—as their equals. With this the relationship alters. They're more like friends."

"Then swear by me you won't tell anyone!"

"I swear."

"To no one at all?"

"Why do you think I brought you all the way here? So we could talk freely and in confidence. Did I call you out in anyone's presence? Did Amma or anyone at all know when...."

"I'm not thinking of Amma. I know you won't tell her. To no one else—is my condition."

"Who's the 'no one else' then?"

"Not even to your friend."

"To Sanjay—you mean?"

"Exactly."

"I won't—if you don't want me to."

Shirin relapsed into silence: a silence that grew to be unbearably long.

"Don't you trust me?"

"There is no one else I could..." Shirin was touched to the quick.

"Then?"

"The truth is: I've done no wrong; you haven't; no one has. That means God's to be blamed." Then as if aware of trespassing limits with those words, she hurriedly rose up. "Let's go home. May be another day, I'll...."

"No, Shirin." Karim gravely sat patriarch-like, as if carved out of the granite under him. "The neighbourhood's given us an ultimatum—if I'm not ready with my answer within the time-limit set, I fear...."

A bell rang in Shirin's mind. Fateh had sounded the warning once. She was not taken therefore entirely by

surprise. "Can't we go some place else, Abba? I don't like it here anymore. It's suffocating."

A spasm of pain went through Karim. "You forget, my child. All neighbourhoods are the same to the poor."

"But how do people come in? How are neighbours concerned? We've nothing to do with them. Are you afraid?"

Karim drew Shirin's head against his knee and pressed it: "Not for myself. I fear what they might do to Sanjay. What'll I do then?"

"Why don't you tell me what exactly's on your mind?"

He raised her head for a straight reply.

"God's to be blamed for making me, Shirin, and not Meeta."

Karim freely gave vent to his heart's desire. "Should he agree to marry you."

Life came to standstill as she fixed her eyes on her father. "How could he?"

"Difficult for sure." Karim's voice was sunk in the profundity of the vaster question linked up.

"The neighbourhood will allow for no third course. Either you must marry a Muslim or Sanjay must be converted. That is, of course,—if he agrees."

"No! Never! That cannot be!" Shirin trembled at the thought of enforced religion and rites.

"Do I want it?" Karim's soul revolted equally in reaction. "I'd rather cut my tongue than bring it to say anything of the sort to so noble a man." With brows furrowed by deeper deliberations, he continued, "Tell me how you precluded that Sanjay must have been told."

"No, Abba! I precluded nothing!"

"Does he feel the same way about you?"

"How should I know?"

"Then how am I to tackle him?"

"Do I ask you to?"

"What'll you do all your life... if he doesn't?"

"Run the press."

Karim's heart bled as he faked light-heartedness. "That's some sublimation!"

"I'm my father's daughter only!" She laughed.

Karim had no comment to make after this. She had said so much in such few words.

* * *

All right through, Karim's hopes twinkled like stars. Spring had nearly given way to summer. He had pulled out his cot into the courtyard and lay thinking in peace since the others still preferred to keep to their little rooms till it got a little hotter.

He had not breathed a word out to either Barkatay or Nehmatay. That he had twinges of indefinable pains, that he tossed and turned and sat up and lay down every few minutes, not a soul knew anything about either. None, that is, with the sole exception of Shirin. She stole out around midnight to console him. "Don't you worry in the least about me, Abba. Just shut your eyes and go to sleep. Nothing untoward will happen, I assure you."

"I'm not worrying about you, daughter. It's this neighbourhood I'm thinking. Some folks could be good, others downright bastards the—" the next more fully-loaded swear-word was too ashamed to face the innocent girl.

"I too loathe the thought of going down the street. Why don't you get a door to the wall this side? No one lives beyond. He'll feel freer," Shirin stopped short coyly.

'Such alterations will serve no great purpose, daughter! The street's safer in every way. That side's deserted. Nobody'll ever come to know even if a body were hacked to pieces and flung to the dogs." Shirin's face fell like a falling-star. What her father had to say could give the creeps to the most adventurous.

"Go to bed! We don't want to wake up the two women, do we?"

Shirin left as bidden; Karim's night stretched out to the length of a year. It had reeled on and on until his head had started reeling.

At daybreak, he softly woke her up for some tea. In no time, he had grabbed his cycle and zoomed off. The idea being to avoid everybody, he had left the message, "Tell your mother I had some urgent business to attend to."

"You're off to his place, aren't you, Abba?" Shirin stood in the doorway figuring out the limited moves in his circuit.

"Well... I really don't know—I might spend just a little time with him."

"You're not going to tell him anything?"

Karim shook his head by way of assurance and rode away fast. At varying speeds, he cycled his way unimpeded through town at this hour of the morning. But when he turned into the last lane, he braked and got off. 'O Lord! To think I'd be having to face this hour! How will I?' He breathed hard. Lost to all the world, he coiled up in his. 'Time was when I could discuss anything under the sun: anything and everything on the earth with him. I could hold back nothing...not even my most-secret desires. But how'll I embark on this?' And his feet dragged down his thoughts. He trudged on a little then reversed. Courage failed him. Again he spurred himself on. 'How can I not take him into confidence? If the whole world is up in arms against us, mustn't he know? None else matters'... But the conflict within him drew on and on alarmingly. Instead of entering the place he had set out for, he suddenly began walking indeterminately in the opposite direction. Within minutes, he was back again, this time as a matter of habit, even leaning his cycle against the wall. At pains to get it all over with, he yet debated. "How must I broach the issue? Should he not be inclined, how'll he come and go as freely as before? Would it not hook up the girl's self-respect? Out of friendship, he might just give in—would that be proper?" He strolled on to the next street. It might be less constrictive. "O Lord!" He was like a repentant sinner.... "Why am I turning away from a tried and trusted friend like a thief?" A few minutes after he was out to reprimand his daughter instead, "Foolish girl! Couldn't you lay off? What's this infection you've gone and caught?"

Calling any daughter foolish—and Shirin of all—brought a bitter taste to his mouth. He spat. The feeling of remorse evidently over, he felt heartily proud of her. She had what one would call a backbone; she had what one desperately needed: understanding; and to beat it all, she had what one should: a way of holding the head up. With what pride had she declared last night: 'I am only my father's daughter!' That was what one would call matchless insight into character! And his heart boiled with rage over all that she was having to go through for no fault of hers.

In the heat of his imagination, at one stage Karim conjured up the faces of the-made-for-each-other pair. At a cooler moment, he reprimanded himself and reined in all such configurations. 'I mustn't forget my own limitations. I should think myself lucky in having his friendship. Should I, with my station in life have greater expectations?"

Karim took his own time mounting his cycle and pedalling towards his place of work. He could not very well have gone home and returned to clock in as required to. It was far too early on the other hand, to report as on duty. So he marked time over a cup of tea at a cubby-hole of a shop.

For the first time in his life, he could not concentrate on what he was doing. Every so often he had to jerk himself to be more attentive to work. He caught himself at unpardonable blunders. He should, for instance, have rotated out two copies of an order; absent-mindedly, he took the typeset off after one. The only saving grace was that the types had not yet been opened out for distribution. Thus was he able to retrieve an error that could, undetected on time, have led to grave consequences.

In the evening, he had ever so much bother—particularly when he came to the crossroads. His feet pedalled fast towards Sanjay's digs, but again courage failed him on reaching. He averted his vision obviously to evade the issue. The decision, he instead unconsciously forced himself to take, was obviously to go home.

On the threshold of his door, his spirits suddenly soared. He heard one of his favourite tunes being hummed. Tiptoeing to the one room it could only have come from, he saw Shirin deeply engrossed in transcribing and humming the particular quatrain she was at for the anthology:

How is any bridegroom-sent-henna...
Hon'd I know, O Father? I'd know it not,
I'd tell you of my Sweetheart's, O Father!—
It's of a deeper red—not to be forgot.

As suddenly as his spirits had soared on entering his house, Karim's eyes grew moist over the lines relating longings from long ago.

* * *

The next day went past, so did the day after. Since Karim had not paid an overdue visit, Sanjay decided to call on him. On turning into the street, he could not but notice Fateh on his doorstep frantically waving out to him.

Directly the young man stepped in, the elder shut the door. "I've got tired of waiting. Yesterday, too, I waited—for over two hours you did not turn up at all."

"I hope all's well. Karim okay?" he searched Fateh's face as if fear-stricken.

Fateh sat on his cot and pulled Sanjay down beside him. "Nothing's wrong with him physically; it's things around; he's terribly upset."

That was astounding news. Had something really gone wrong he would have got in touch with him fast enough. He could have sent Salamat with a message.

"I advised him to talk the matter over with you. Do you think he would listen? Breaking my head against a wall, I was."

"What's happened?" Sanjay looked too careworn for his years.

"How can I tell you? If he hasn't the heart to tell you himself, how can I, I ask you? Since yesterday he hasn't got up. Covered himself from hand to foot with a sheet, he has. And not moved since!"

Sanjay fired a shot in the dark. It hit the target! "Has it something to do with the Hindu-Muslim question?"

"What else, Mian! That's the trouble with folks low-down! Rich people way up don't bother. They mix freely. No one cares. No one says anything."

"Is that all?" Sanjay got up, immensely relieved. "Why did he not come and speak to me about it? What's there to work? All you have to have, is the will. Work can be done anywhere. If not here—somewhere else—down town."

Fateh pulled Sanjay down by the arm again and sat him by his side. "There's much more to it, my young man. The elders around are pressing Shirin's neck into the marriage-noose. She's craned it away—beyond their reach. That's what's made them arch their backs harder."

"How does the communal question feature in?"

"There must be something deeper. How could I know? Since yesterday, Barkatay and Nehmatay too have been after the poor girl, and she's been weeping her heart and eyes sore."

Sanjay rose up again. "I'll go size things up for myself.... Let me see."

Fateh held on to him. "Look, how are you coming to ask anything and how's he going to answer you with everybody around? Sit down. I'll send for him. We can talk things over in quiet."

After a minute or two of indecision, Sanjay gave in. "Okay. I'll be waiting for him on the other side of the machine room. Tell him to come right away."

The moment Fateh's back was turned for Karim's, Sanjay did an about-turn in double-quick time to the ruins.

Karim did not take long in keeping the appointment. Seeing his long face and lifeless body, Sanjay took him by the arm. "So it boils down to this, doesn't it? You didn't care to contact him even."

"I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself. I should have lost no time." Karim selected a rock to sit on. "It's all so stupid... so utterly absurd. Had I the means, I honestly would turn my back on them forever by moving out—bag and baggage."

Sanjay took the cue farther. "If you want me to speak the truth, Mian, one would fly off the world to spaces above and beyond. Only tell me of one good place where they who live life, allow others to live theirs."

"Never was a truer word said, my friend. There are hordes of bastards banded up everywhere."

"While the most brilliant brains are being exiled every day.... But let's not go off at a tangent. Let's come to our specific problem."

"The problem's the same. It was always there; it will continue to be there. I wish I could wander from street to street, from height to height. Like him. The bandit's within my warp, O Ramdas! O Fateh Mohammed! Where are the immortal voices of our poet-prophets?"

Sanjay put an understanding hand on Karim's shoulder. "How does the noble friendship between the Hindu, Ramdas and the Muslim, Fateh Mohammed affect their tribes? We won't meet each other here. There are other places."

"It's not that...." Karim could not but sink in abject despair, gain into a deep-think-session.

"Then, for mercy's sake, tell me, what is it? Uncle Fateh alluded to something more."

Karim's head fell—chin touching chest. "That's a problem even more stupendous."

Sanjay sought to pull his friend out of the depths making him so very despondent. "Fine then—if problems are that vastly grave, let's all go into voluntary exile."

Karim rallied all the strength he could in his present broken-down state. "Our Shirin's harping still, on the machine-string while those living in towering tops with balconies have their hawks'-eyes on her. With their talons they'll tear an unmarried girl to death."

Sanjay now sank into his think-tank. When he scrambled out, it was with an earnest endeavour to pull through the present impasse. "Karim Mian! Will you allow me to have a few words with Shirin?"

"Most willingly. Whenever you wish. I'll go myself to fetch her. What's going to be the outcome of all our talk if she doesn't come out with what's on her heart and mind?"

"She will, I'm sure."

"She won't. I should know her better. She'll sit with her lips sealed tight."

Sanjay helped Karim on to his feet. "You may be perfectly right. Only give me one good chance to test my powers."

"O Lord!" Karim permitted the help preferred, and was about to be on his way, when Sanjay held him back a moment. "Just one promise first, my friend! Don't you break off with me, should I say something you don't particularly like."

In silence, Karim offered his hand. That clasp was more binding than a torrent of words.

On his leaving, Sanjay rested the palms of his hands on the dilapidated walls and shut his eyes as if in deep concentration. So he attuned his ears to the ancient voices settled there from when the habitat first had bustled with life. Then he rippled his fingers over the centuries'-old crumbling stone-and-dust of the well, softly touched his forehead, and bowed his head in salutation to the age of the earth from which the stone must have been hewn.

Twilight had deepened into the darkness of night when father and daughter appeared. So dark, in fact, had it grown that it took them time to detach Sanjay's form from the rest of the scene. And a gentle tremor shook Shirin when she approached him. Complainingly, she looked at her father for not briefing her on the clear aim of a visit in so God-forsaken an area as this. "Abba! You said this place was dangerous," she pointed out to Sanjay who was alone.

"For whom? Me?"

"Not when we are around. Not when I am standing by." Karim answered both of them as he cautiously tried to find footing on a spot a little away from them.

"You don't have to be so discreet, my friend! What I'd like to ask could as well be asked in your presence." Despite Sanjay's uninhibited candour, Karim preferred to be where he had already found a slab to sit on.

Shirin too meanwhile had made herself as comfortable as she could, considering everything, when Sanjay echoed their fears for him. "Is this place really as dangerous as you make it out to be?"

Shirin thought he had missed the gist of things both said and unsaid. "Not for everyone," she accentuated her words distinctly. "On religious counts."

"So religion alone is in danger, is it?" Sanjay twisted the entire trend of their argument in a serio-comic manner. Even Karim felt pretty tickled on hearing this and mighty pleased on more to come. "Then, just as instead of one, two undertake a pilgrimage together, so both religions should move on together as well to be safely out of harm's way."

Shirin raised her eyes—beaming with a radiance from an idea more immense and intense in implication than any she had ever known originating. Sanjay perched himself atop a high stone opposite her. "So then... are you still hell-bent? Are you really intent on baking raw words?"

"I am!" Shirin was as resolute as ever.

"But I can't guarantee you a press."

Shirin's silence that followed seemed impregnated with the vaguer question: "Then what are we talking about?"

"There are lots of other words in life that need to be baked in different fires." And fixedly staring into her eyes, he meant

to get these across. "Religion, marriage and relationships are all ingredients for baking these raw words."

Shirin's eyes grew moist. She looked down on the ground. "Perhaps... but some are doomed by Fate to be dealt raw words."

The tone of her voice was penetrating. "Why? Why must you say that?" He took her hands in his. "Can't you accept me?"

She bent her head—so low that it nearly touched his hands. She sat tongue-tied.

"You can't?" he patted her hands. Trembling, she grasped his, and raising her head to look through him, spoke the little she could. "Some words are dumb." He pressed her fingers with his lips and called out. "Karim Mian! We'll have to bow in salutation again to your dumb daughter!"

He was about to release her hands in the intended act of getting up, but she held on. The session was not quite over. "Can you really drink water tomorrow from the cup you drank yesterday?"

In reply, he gently pressed her to his side. Seeing, on rising, that Karim still sat on, he as gently kissed her. "I knew all along that from your hands alone could I drink the Waters of Immortality!"

Turning, he called out "Karim Mian!" The time had ripened for his friend to join them. "Didn't you say that real writers were prophets in their own ways? Never was a truer word said. The end of the novel's turned out to be true!"

Karim wiped the tears of joy from his eyes. "And I'd thought our tiny Taji had Mumtaz's soul in her! How wrong had I been not to have seen it in Shirin."

"Didn't I say I was only my father's daughter?" Shirin pressed her head against Karim's.

"Where did you say your novel ends?"

"On Resurrection and Salvation. When the tormented are filled again with flesh and blood. On the forty-ninth-day, to be precise."

Shirin recaptured the whole novel in her mind. "The one on Creation and Recreation, isn't it?"

But Sanjay had yet not finished off with Karim. "All's on this good earth: heaven and hell. So often does man who is born here, die here; so often does he who dies here, get reborn

here itself. Your daughter's given me the breath of life all over again today."

Karim affectionately embraced Sanjay. "I said from the very beginning that you were both friend and son to me. But not in my wildest dreams believe me, had I figured out this relationship." And his eyes got blurred again with tears. "What you said about Shirin so fits her, that I'd ask you to call her by that very name and make her a Hindu."

Sanjay planted the palm of his hand firmly on Karim's lips. "That cannot be. Neither I nor Shirin's ever going to talk of conversion. Hadn't I just said that just as two setting out on a pilgrimage together for safety, so must religions go on side by side? So ever to be out of harm's way."

"Is it possible?" Shirin wondered.

"Herein lies the beauty of our Hell!" Sanjay beamed a smile.

With Shirin on his left and Sanjay on his right, Karim picked his steps gingerly from the rubble of the ruins as he felt a lump rising in his throat.

"Watch out!" Shirin cautioned the men. "That's our entire neighbourhood. They've come out in masse for parley or for open war."

"That's the boon-cum-curse web of the forty-ninth-day!" Sanjay philosophised. "With rebirth on the earth, the struggle begins anew! But let's not lose sight of our goals. We've to install our machine. We've to face the situation of our novel banned. Yet let's not forget: These are routine clouds skimming across sunny skies, over shimmering waters and undulating lands."

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